

# Bandwagon

The Journal of the Circus Historical Society

Vol. 61 No. 1 2017

**RINGLING AND BARNUM  
BROS. & BAILEY  
COMBINED  
CIRCUS**

**THE PEERLESS  
FLYING  
CONCELLOS**  
Featuring  
**MISS  
ANTOINETTE**

ONLY GIRL IN  
THE WORLD  
ACCOMPLISHING  
A-DOUBLE-AND-A  
HALF SOMERSAULT  
IN MID-AIR TO  
A-HAND-TO-HAND  
CATCH!

The poster features three women in red leotards standing on a blue platform. Above them, three women are shown in mid-air, performing a hand-to-hand catch. The background is dark blue with faint white circular patterns.



# *The Circus Historical Society seeks submissions for the* **2017 Stuart Thayer Prize**

The Circus Historical Society is seeking submissions for this year's Stuart Thayer Prize. The prize annually recognizes a superior work in circus history and is named in honor of Stuart Thayer, the author of numerous foundational and insightful works published about the antebellum American circus and menagerie.

*Note: the eligibility criteria as posted on the Circus Historical Society website is out of date. Please refer to this announcement for current information about the format and deadline for submissions.*

## **Eligibility Criteria**

**Content** A nominated work must be substantially about American circus history or a very closely related topic.

**Format** Works may be in any printed form: book, article, pamphlet, booklet, bibliography, compendium of essays, exhibit, a single essay that is part of a larger work, or an original work contained in digital format on a disk or loaded on a permanent website.

**Posthumous publication** Works by deceased authors being published posthumously for the first time are eligible for nomination. The prize shall be awarded to the closest survivor or an immediate family representative, or to a representative of the organization that accomplished the publication.

**Exclusions** Exhibits, websites, symposiums, etc., that do not issue a permanent document or are not archived in some permanent format are not eligible for nomination. Fictional works are not eligible. Simple re-printings and new editions of older works, without annotation or other updating that substantially improve the value of the work, are not eligible for nomination. Virtual and digital library content and activity are not eligible for nomination.

**Release date** A work published, issued or released within 2 (two) calendar years prior to the prize year is eligible for nomination.

**Nominators** Any current member in good standing of the Circus Historical Society may nominate one or more works for the prize. Officers, board members and members of the prize committee who are CHS members may nominate works. Members may nominate their own works for the prize.

**Nominations submission** All nominations must be submitted in the format described below. No other nomination forms will be accepted. Nominations may be submitted in hard copy, by fax or email delivered scan. Each nomination must be signed and dated by the nominator.

**Deadline** All nominations must be submitted no later than March 31, 2017. The prize is awarded at the CHS convention this year.

To apply please include the nominator's contact information, as well as the **author, title and publication date** of the work nominated. The application must also include a brief statement that advocates why the nominated work is worthy of the prize. Please refer to aspects of cutting edge scholarship, new content, advances in knowledge, superior or new research technique, or other features embodied in the work.

Submit nominations to:

Stuart Thayer Prize Committee  
Circus World  
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2017 Volume 61, Number 1

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# Circus Historical Society

[circushistory.org](http://circushistory.org)

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*"To preserve, promote, and share through education the history and cultural significance of the circus and allied arts, past and present."*

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## Note from Editor

With many thanks to Maureen Brunsdale, this issue of *Bandwagon* features additional information about the aerial arts and the important individuals that came to the American circus through the practice barns of Bloomington, Illinois. I am sure CHS members will enjoy reading the final portions of articles by retired aerialist Cherie Valentine and CHS Board Member, Steve Gossard. This issue also includes an article about the incomparable Art Concello by Mort Gamble and Maureen Brunsdale. The article, based on their presentation at our past convention, is part of a larger project by the pair. We will all look forward to learning much more about this important figure in circus history. Fred Dahlinger has kindly detailed the events of our 2016 convention in Sarasota. As anyone can see through the photos of Richard Czina and board member and Past CHS President Deborah Walk, a wonderful time was had by all. And as always, many thanks are due to John & Mardi Wells for their efforts in designing and preparing our journal.

To study history is to look for patterns. As I was searching for some reference information while preparing the material for this issue, I happened across an article published in the *New York Times* of January of 1932 – 85 years ago. The title, "Circus Fans Seek Museum for Relics" caught my eye, but it was part of the





subtitle that seemed especially timely: "Some Say Show is Dead." The article described an early CFA meeting at the Hotel Roosevelt where one member, sculptor Luigi Coppini, declared that "the circus is fading from the American scene." Others in the room, described as "prosperous business men, writers and former circus press agents" were said to have "salted their peanuts with their tears." I think many people today could relate.

What struck me about the article, however was the reply given by author Earl Chapin May, whose book *From Rome to Ringling* is a staple in many circus libraries:

"'Disappearing?' echoed Mr. Chapin, 'I greatly fear that Signor Coppini has allowed the prevailing pessimism to warp his viewpoint. I happen to know that in previous periods of depression, back in the eighties, there were others who thought as he does now, but they were wrong.'

'The circus does not dominate the amusement situation today, that is true; but it continues to be a great American institution....'

Although the end of such an important title in circus history comes as quite a shock, our organization must remind the world that the circus arts have always evolved with the times and that they continue to be a vibrant part of American entertainment.

JLP

## About the covers

by Jennifer Lemmer Posey

While Art Concello's contributions to the history of circus are many, and explored with more depth in this issue, the pairing of Art and Antoinette in the center ring of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows has been heralded as "the highest peak of team flying ever witnessed at the time."<sup>1</sup>

The Erie Lithograph poster on our cover dates circa 1935, a time when the Flying Concellos were recognized as the feature flying act of the Ringling show.

On the back cover is a candid photo of the pair taken on the Ringling lot in July of 1939. Both images are part of the Tibbals Collection at The Ringling Museum.

1. "Art Concello" (obituary), *The Independent*, October 3, 2001. Accessed online <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/art-concello-9140017.html>

*Below is a photo taken by Edward Kelty of the Ringling's aerial stars of the 1932 season, the Concellos second year on the show. Art and Antoinette can be seen fourth and fifth from the left. The Codona Troupe of Alfredo, Vera Bruce, and Lazlo Codona are third, fourth, and fifth from the right.*







# “Little Caesar”: The Secret Life and High-Flying Times of Art Concello

by Maureen Brunsdale  
and Mort Gamble

*Oil painting presented “To a Great Showman, Arthur M. Concello” by the Ringling executives and cast in 1961.*

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Arthur M. Concello was one of the most remarkable and controversial figures in American circus history...a brilliant trapeze artist, a creative designer and engineer, a shrewd businessman, an enterprising entrepreneur, and an expert manager of *The Greatest Show on Earth* during some of the most critical years in its history.

For a man who never wanted the spotlight – he was a kind of James A. Bailey to John Ringling North’s Barnum – why does he remain, nevertheless, one of the most fascinating and influential figures in American circus history whose legacy is obvious and lasting, but often overlooked?

Arthur Marshall Vasconcellos was born on March

26, 1911, the son of a Portuguese railroad machinist who worked in Spokane, Washington. His parents had roots in Illinois. When Art was three, the family moved back to Bloomington to live at the house his mother inherited after her first husband, John Killian, died. Art lived there with his step-siblings, Grace and Joe Killian and his parents, Mattie and Papa Vas.

By the time he was 10, Art was training with C. D. Curtis, who knew the trapeze arts and worked as a YMCA coach. He assured the boy that being a star trapeze performer could lead to big money.<sup>1</sup>

That’s all Concello needed to hear. He applied himself



to the art of flying. And he was in the right place for that – the town was the cradle of trapeze acts, with practice rigs appearing in theaters, the Ward barn, and the YMCA. Eddie Ward, a flyer who furnished acts for shows owned by the American Circus Corporation, saw him practicing at the Y and brought him to his barn on the east side of town. That barn was trapeze central for many acts originating out of Bloomington – including those that Art himself later would assemble.

While Art was doing amazing things at the Y and The Barn, he wasn't doing so well in school. He was a student of exceptional energy and incredible academic disinterest. The local newspaper shared limited reports of his early activities but we did learn, for example, that he made the honor roll – in his religion classes. Among his early boyhood classmates were Harold "Tuffy" Genders and Lewis "Laz" Rosen. Both would remain lifelong friends and cronies. The cast of Bloomingtonians in his life at this time also included Eldon Day, Wayne Larey, Eldred Sleeter, Lester Tomas, and Oscar Jordan. These remained near him for the rest of their lives.

Art first left his family when he was 15 to be a Ward flyer and a year later, he dropped out of school for good to join the big top as a member of the Ward-Kimball Troupe on the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus, a Corporation show. The die was cast. Concello would return to Bloomington, but in another sense, he would never look back.

While he was growing up in Illinois, there was a girl about a year older than he growing up in Vermont, Marie Antoinette Comeau. Her parents, Toussaint and

Jane, divorced when she was 12. The effect of that on their seven children was life-altering. The older children – like Florida Gertrude Comeau, known by nearly everyone as Mickey – dispersed with the winds while the younger ones often became wards of social workers. Such was the case with Antoinette. A social worker named Alice Gray worked to get her young charge admitted to the convent, Mount Saint Mary's, in Burlington, Vermont. There, she obtained excellent grades but she was devastatingly unhappy.

So when she went to visit Mickey, who had found her way to the circus via chance and Terrell Jacobs, she begged for permission to stay. Eddie Ward, Mickey's boss, granted that wish and by the end of the 1927 season, Antoinette came back to Bloomington to train. Once there she met Tuffy Genders and Art, and she learned how to fly.

Antoinette joined the Floto show as a cloud swing performer. Art went with the John Robinson Circus, but by the

spring of 1929, they were both on that show and were married. A newspaper announcement of their wedding noted that Art was "recognized as one of the most skilled men in his profession."<sup>2</sup>

He and his new wife formed the Flying Concellos, and appeared with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey in 1931, performing in Ring 3. In the center ring were the Flying Codonas. Alfredo Codona's second wife was America's sweetheart of the big top, Lillian Leitzel, who had fallen to her death earlier that year. Codona later suffered a career-ending injury, descended into despair and tragedy, and eventually shot his third wife and himself.

The royal first family of the air had ceased to be but another genera-

*Record of Antoinette Comeau*

*Home Address*

*Date of Birth* April 22, 1910

*Parents* Miss A. G. Hickox

*When Admitted* Sept. 1924

*From what school* Newport, Vt

*Course Chosen* Classical

*Date of Graduation*

	1925		1926		1927	
	Jan	June	Jan	June	Jan	June
Religion	95	94	97	94		
Algebra	87	91				
Community Civics	93	93				
Expression	90	100	97	94		
English	86	92	89	92	84	85
Latin	92	90	90	91	91	85
Vocal	90	100	93	100	90	90
Physical Culture	98	100	100		95	95
Greek			95	95	95	93
Geometry			96	94		
Church History					90	89
Modern					92	90

*Antoinette Comeau's grades reflect keen intelligence.*





*Antoinette Comeau cutting an imposing figure early in her career.* Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections

tion of trapeze royalty was waiting in the wings.

Art was regularly catching the difficult triple somersault. The triple was literally the “killer” trick. It took scores of leapers and flyers to often gruesome deaths – usually with broken necks. As for his partner and wife, who also aspired to perform the triple, Art offered this technical appraisal in a 1935 interview: “...I think she’ll get it all right in time. She is unusually quick, mentally and physically. Flying and somersaulting comes natural to her, and she has

plenty of confidence.”<sup>3</sup> Two years later, she became the first woman to execute the triple somersault successfully, in Detroit, which she pronounced her “lucky city.” Catching the trick with less regularity than her husband did, Antoinette nevertheless secured her place in circus history as a world-class performer.

Art was equally self-assured, smart and shrewd, and ambitious – the more he flew, the more restless he seemed to be up there on the pedestal board. Looking down from those heights and counting the houses, he wanted to get into circus management, first training and managing other flying acts – up to nine at a time – then watching for his chance to break into the nebulous world of circus business affairs.

As with the tragedy of the Codonas, Art’s next big break came amid another disaster – the 1938 closing of Ringling in Scranton when a strike compelled the big show to finish the rest of its “season” by sending the top acts to the Ringling-owned Al G. Barnes-Sells Floto Circus. Concello, who had led many of his fellow performers in signing a statement of loyalty to Ringling management, had also endeared himself to John Ringling North in another crucial and very telling way – he had lent \$50,000 to North for a bond to help secure the financing of the circus under North’s new management. It was repaid. “From ’38 on,” Concello recalled to Tom Parkinson, “I was friendly with North.”<sup>4</sup> Among his other contributions to the show’s operation at this time was Art’s recommendation that the 300 baggage horses be replaced with tractors. Always practical, he noted dryly that the machines “ain’t gonna eat every day.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus began a legendary on-again, off-again business relationship that lasted into the 1960s, coinciding with the circus equivalent of a reality show that marked the fortunes and management of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey throughout the rest of its history as a canvas operation. Concello would be at the center of much of it. And when he wasn’t, he had other circus business to attend to. His purchase and operation of the Russell Bros. Circus in the forties was more than a sideline. It marked the beginning of an equally symbiotic relationship with Clyde Beatty, the circus that eventually bore the cat trainer’s name, and those who sparred with Art for control of it.

In 1950, retired from flying but not from his various entrepreneurial tendencies, Concello helped to finesse the deal that led to the Cecil B. DeMille cinema spectacle, *The Greatest Show on Earth*. Concello, the general manager of the Ringling show, true to form, refused to appear in the movie; the fictional character of the hard-bitten circus boss



was played by Charlton Heston. Art's young son with Antoinette, Randy, appeared in a scene in absentia with two baby gorillas. Antoinette went back up on the flying platform for a crucial turning point of the picture, while Art schemed behind the scenes to make as much money as possible from the Hollywood mogul, whom it is said he had under surveillance during the early shooting in Sarasota. Art's patented mechanical seat wagons, two of which in the center section never appeared on the official manifest of the show's equipment, played themselves in the film, as did his new aluminum quarter poles and another Concello innovation – an abbreviated menagerie crammed into the front end of the big top. With “all the God damned lights in the world” under the tent to illuminate the Technicolor spectacle, it all made for an entertaining love-triangle set against documentary-style footage of the grand circus in its final days under the big top.<sup>6</sup>

Art's continual operational improvements foreshadowed the ultimate show-down with North over the size of the circus, its train, its personnel, the number of elephants, nearly everything. Art had hoped, as he revealed to Tom Parkinson years later, that a reduced Ringling show could still make money. He calculated, for example, that the big circus could still be impressive on 60 railroad cars, not 80. His boss would not be dissuaded. In late 1953, foreseeing that North's plans for expansion were suicidal, Art resigned from *The Greatest Show on Earth*, retiring to Bloomington and Sarasota and waiting for North to call him again “in a couple of years.”<sup>7</sup>

At this point, it was all simply too costly to maintain, with limited return on investment. For Arthur M. Concello, losing money organizationally translated into losing money personally. He had also undoubtedly surveyed the popular-culture landscape and the shifting tastes of the public in mass entertainment. Now they seemed to love “Lucy” on a tiny screen more than they did the oversized spectacle that the *New York Times* later would describe as “the kind of circus America had grown up with.”<sup>8</sup>

In the summer of 1956, right on cue, North did call Concello. The big show had foundered in Bridgeville, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh, and North again called upon his former manager to save his circus. One thing the two men had in common was practicality. John Ringling North II tells us that he knew that Art would come back to the show, “knew my uncle would be on the phone to him.” In characterizing their relationship, Uncle John Ringling North had once told his nephew that “he never forgave anyone



*The Flying Concellos comfortable up in the air. Indoor venue date unknown.*

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Left to right are Pat Valdo, Clyde Beatty, Rudy Bundy, Art Concello likely jackpotting.

Image courtesy of Rick Purdue

– except Art. ‘I reached into my heart and forgave him.’”<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the big circus lay immobilized in Florida. Bill Ballantine noted that the show “was as dead as a two-headed sideshow baby.”<sup>10</sup>

North set up a meeting with Art, then another and another. Concello held out for ten percent of the show – North’s 51 percent – as well as of all of North’s assets. He also wanted a seat on the board of directors, as a stockholder. “John, you S.O.B., you come around here when the God damn thing is sick. Damn it, I don’t want nothing to do with it.” But after a month of keeping North on the ropes, he extracted a promise that “you go away from it and let it alone. You go to Europe and let it alone...If I’m going to do it, then you got to let me do it.”<sup>11</sup>

Art ordered him to negotiate with the circus’s creditors to buy time; the big show owed \$1.6 million. Now it fell to Concello’s organizational genius to reorganize the circus into a streamlined arena attraction – assuming enough arenas could be built in time. But they were being built, and Concello was ready for them. He junked most of the tent-

show equipment, designed new aerial rigging for buildings, bought a fleet of trucks and later, small, lightweight wagons to fit inside the hollowed-out interiors of the old rail coaches, now known as “tunnel cars,” as the show ventured back onto the rails in the early sixties. He sold off the Sarasota quarters, moving the operation to Venice and constructing a new performance arena there. As always, John Ringling North II recalls, Art was “tough on what he wanted done.” “Don’t f--- with me,” he thundered at a contractor. “I’ll be over myself with some big people.”<sup>12</sup> Reducing the payroll, he nevertheless lined up sufficient acts worthy of *The Greatest Show on Earth* – rehiring some Ringling veterans who had quit the show as it went on life support. He controlled the local promoters’ access to the new route. Among them was Irvin Feld.

It all worked. After a few years of uncertainty, Concello’s firm hand once again put the circus back on firm ground – or rather solidly on the new rubber mats that replaced the dirt flooring from previous arena days. In a 1961 interview with the *Dallas Morning News*, Art seemed satisfied that



the new format was up to standard: "Some guy told me, 'The elephants ain't as good anymore.' I don't understand him...it's the same damn elephants."<sup>13</sup>

Concello's personal life had also been in transition. He and Antoinette divorced in 1956. She had apparently put up with a lot. One of her fellow performers recalls, "She'd come and tell me things, you know. In fact, she was gonna get a divorce, and she didn't, every time he'd come by she'd call off the divorce 'cause she was nuts about him and he knew how to play her. You know what I mean, he knew what to say to get her to come back... he had a hold on her, emotionally..."<sup>14</sup>

After Antoinette died of lung cancer in 1984, Art married his longtime love, Margaret "Maggie" Smith, a British dancer and aerialist. Some speculate that he waited because he didn't want to hurt Antoinette anymore; the two had trained and matured together, had a son together, and Art, in his own way, did seem to love her. In any case, he and Maggie were married on June 29, 1984, and from all accounts she was crazy about him.

As the Ringling show rebounded at home, John North dreamed of expanding the brand, to Europe and the 1964 New York World's Fair. Concello was put in charge of the augmented franchise. Over the years, the pattern had been



*Program from Thrill Circus.*

Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections



*Art Concello and Margaret Smith.*

Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections

that whenever Big Bertha got in trouble, Art was called back into the Ringling management fold. This happened, he told reporters, "about every ten years." Out, back, out, back – time and again.<sup>15</sup> By mid-October 1963, he was out again – this time he was dismissed for the dismal European dates of the Ringling-Barnum show, though he retained, as did North, 25% interest in the World's Fair Circus.

That same year, he had also set up the route for the American tour of the Moscow State Circus, putting them in Pittsburgh at a time Ringling would have been there. Was this intentional, or perhaps an oversight? One surmises that Concello never suffered from oversights.

In 1964 he filed a suit against North for \$40,589 – largely unpaid wages for the previous two years. (That would be just over \$315,000 in today's money.) We do not know the disposition of this case yet.

Again in 1967, Art managed the Moscow State Circus's tour of the United States after divesting himself of his corporate directorship in the ACME Operating Company. ACME was the umbrella company for the Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus, Sells & Gray and King Bros. shows.





Art Concello and Tex Copeland at the rail car downtown.

Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections

Meanwhile, his partnership with Morris Chalfen's Holiday on Ice, a subsidiary of Madison Square Garden and ABC, flourished. He topped five Holiday on Ice touring companies and was again in charge of the American Circus's tour of Soviet Russia.

With all of those plates spinning, he was also developing the Thrill Circus for Madison Square Garden. It was reported in *Variety* that Ringling-Barnum was watching the Thrill Circus very closely to see, it was stated, "what the future of circus looks like." This is what was seen: a fantastic artistic success – and a financial failure. It's no surprise to us that the new owners were watching an old veteran to see what the future of circus looked like.

Perhaps that financial failure was the impetus for Art to diversify his investments, or maybe he was tiring of all the globe-trotting. Whatever the reason, in 1970, he bought

the Yellow Cab Company in Sarasota. One day, Art had landed at the Sarasota airport, according to one account, and after he retrieved his bags he went out to hail a taxi. But he couldn't get one – because none was there. So he decided to buy the cab company. We don't know if that story is true, but this is: In just over a year's time, they had 25 drivers using 15 cars to shuttle 1,000 passengers a day, averaging two passengers per trip and were asking the city for permits to increase their fleet by five cars.<sup>16</sup> Undoubtedly he always had a cab at the airport during arrival times.

Art hit traditional retirement age, 65, in 1976. Shortly thereafter, he joined up with Carlos Vasquez to create Vascon, Inc., the company which in 1979 toured the Moscow Circus in Puerto Rico and the United States. Art was president, Carlos, vice-president.

Antoinette, on the other hand, got back into the flying business in 1964 – as a choreographer for *The Greatest Show on Earth*. She worked tirelessly until her death recruiting and training women for the aerial ballet, and was often rewarded richly in the words of reviewers for her efforts.

Art did not lack for corporations and partnerships in his so-called golden years, Vascon, Artvas, NorthArt and more. We need to learn more about these ventures and how he spent his time – at the office downtown in a former rail car...designing rigging...mentoring new acts?

Throughout his life, Concello was often photographed with a cigar in hand. Indeed, he never stopped smoking those stogies. On July 4, 2001, he died from complications of pneumonia. Oddly, his most extensive obituaries appeared overseas, in both London and Australia. In Sarasota, his death received a simple 12 paragraphs. Perhaps he would have liked that – small press for a small man of giant proportions.

It is not clear if Arthur Concello considered anything worth mentioning as his legacy to the circus world. In the 1973 interview with Tom Parkinson, he downplayed some of his signature contributions that we remember him for today:

"...when I seen the situation with labor for the seat wagons, I said there's only one way they can do this is to let machines do it. And so, of course, when you get an idea and it nets you \$200,000, it's a good idea! Now the different things I developed for the circus, I didn't get anything out of the rest of them; just like the rigging, I just did that because I had a job there doing it and, of course, I got ten percent of North, which worked out nicely for me."<sup>17</sup>

Owning his own show "was like going to the office, but you make money doing it." Even with flying, starting his



career from the ground up, literally, "I was never too interested in flying. I did it for money, for the circus. Management, I seen more money."<sup>18</sup>

He did make contributions, however. One longtime observer notes that "the big shows remained much longer than they might have without him," and adds that Concello had a keen sense of managing people, of knowing quickly whether they were in the right job.<sup>19</sup> His command of logistics and the myriad of details that define a show appears indisputable. Despite later business failures and some personal disappointments, he was extraordinarily lucky and resourceful, his career not only coinciding with the last great days of the big top in the twentieth century but helping, as well, to define that era.

When the Ring of Fame dedicated a plaque to Art at St. Armand's Circle, Dorita Estes delivered the tribute. Her family had known and worked for Art, and she remained indebted to him:

"(He was)...a true business man of the circus. And as a business man he knew he must work through other people...A man who hated publicity or notoriety for himself but a man who needs to be part of the circle if it is ever to be complete...In the names of the Concello Family and the other men and women and children whose lives, including mine, were not only touched but molded by this short, powerful man with a cigar, today we honor him in our way (not his) by making him a part of this circle of circus greats."<sup>20</sup> **Bw**



Art Concello in the early 1930s with an air of youthful confidence about the tricks he will one day catch.

Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections

## Endnotes

1. Brunsdale, Maureen and Mark Schmitt. *The Bloomington-Normal Circus Legacy: The Golden Age of Aerialists*. Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2013, 82.
2. "Vasconcellos, Local Aerialist, Marries." *Bloomington Daily Pantagraph*, June 9, 1929.
3. Stott, Raymond Toole. "That Daring Young Girl on the Flying Trapeze." *The Sawdust Ring*, vol. 11, no. 4, January-March, 1935, 9.
4. Parkinson, Tom. "A 1973 Interview with Art Concello." *Bandwagon*, Sept.-Oct., 2001, 11.
5. Parkinson, 11.
6. Parkinson, 19.
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10. Ballantine, Bill. "Damndest Showman Since Barnum." *Cavalier*, October 1957, 73.
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13. "Tents Gone: Showman Glad Circus Changed." *The Dallas Morning News*, October 29, 1961.
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20. Estes, Dorita. Ring of Fame dedication for Arthur M. Concello, January 17, 2004.



Brothers George, Bill,  
Fred and Roy

# The Valentine Family of Flyers

Part 2

of Bloomington, Illinois

*by Cherie Valentine with photos from the author's collection except as noted.*



The back of this photo reads: "A half-dozen trapeze acts are using the Bloomington YMCA to practice in the off season." George, Lorraine, Harry LaMar, Clyde Noble and Sue Peltó - 1950.



## 1950s

In 1950 Fred was in Buffalo the week of April 10<sup>th</sup> with the Hamid-Morton Circus. That spring they played Washington, D.C., Altoona, Palisade Park, New Jersey,<sup>1</sup> Montreal, and in July, Dave Abbott joined as their catcher. Also in July Fred renewed acquaintances with Willie Atterbury, sway pole artist. The two hadn't seen each other since Willie, a former flyer for the Valentines, entered the Navy during the war.<sup>2</sup>

An article in the Dunkirk, *New York Observer* on August 17<sup>th</sup> has a photo of the Flying Valentinos doing their passing trick with two Ferris wheels in the background. Well, they weren't in that city at that time. Fred was. So, Fred used George's photo to advertise his act. The caption reads, "The Flying Valentines, trapeze artists, pictured above."

In late October, Freddie, as he liked to be called for many years, played Vicksburg, Mississippi. He reported to the October 21<sup>st</sup> *Billboard* that his troupe was playing eight weeks of Southern Fair dates of Billie J. Collins' Tivoli Expo Shows. In December, they played Baton Rouge – even though it was postponed twice due to cold weather<sup>3</sup> – and New Orleans for the Tom Packs Shrine Circus.<sup>4</sup> Other acts at Baton Rouge included Clyde Beatty, Johnny Cline, Liberty horses, Richard Shipley with the elephants, The Walendas, Bobo Barnett, the Hustrei Duo, aerial and the Flying Voises.

Bill's troupe opened April 28, 1950 at the St. Louis Police Circus for two weeks. There, the two flying acts, the Flying LaMars and the LaVals, closed with a double exchange after a special announcement was made.<sup>5</sup>

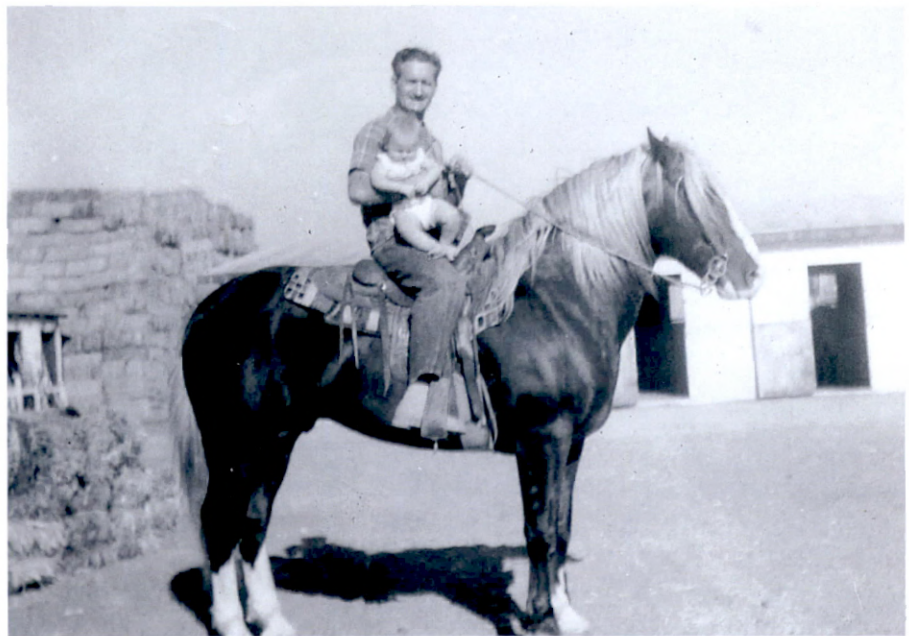
In June, they played a lot of Illinois towns for the Tom Packs Circus including a three-day stand in Carbondale for the Ainad Shrine Circus where the Flying Meteors joined them.<sup>6</sup> July found them performing in Pittsburgh's Forbes Field, in Wheeling, West Virginia and opening in Toronto for the Tom Pack's Outdoor Circus and Thrill Show at Maple Leaf Stadium. Bill was the *Billboard* Sale Agent, and Bennie Gibson, former catcher, was the Chief Electrician.

Elgin, Illinois welcomed the LaVals on September 7<sup>th</sup> for the State Hospital show.<sup>7</sup> Two weeks later a big photo of the group appears in the Greenville,

Mississippi Delta Democrat Times. The caption reads, "The Flying LaVals act is another family act of the Braly Circus at the Delta Fair and Livestock Show. They are Bill Valentine, sons Billy Glen, Slick, who's only 14 but who's been in the trapeze act since he was 12, and Virginia Sheider. They all go home to Houston next week for the youngsters to go back to school. They have a swinging rig in their back yard for winter practice."<sup>8</sup>

Roy's act opened for the Ward Bros. Circus on April 24, 1950 in Port Arthur, Texas at the Seahawk Ball Park, followed by Beaumont and San Antonio. Dick Lewis reported into *Billboard* on May 20<sup>th</sup>, saying, "Roy was knocked out falling into the net Saturday afternoon. He took a nasty buster, but it didn't keep him from appearing in the night show."<sup>9</sup> From Texas they went on to New Mexico, Arizona, and California – playing Long Beach, San Diego and San Bernardino, where their catcher was Ralph Oyseth.

The first week in August they were in Greenville, Mississippi at the Delta Fair with the Braly Circus. Acts included the Cycling Kirks, Bob Atterbury's elephant and Ernie Wiswell's Funny Ford. In late September they worked for Bob Morton at the Boston Garden. The September 30<sup>th</sup> *Billboard* reported that "Col. Bob Morton has signed the Flying Romas for their third consecutive year of Hamid-Morton Circus indoor dates, which get under way in Boston, with stands in Toronto, Philadelphia and Atlanta to follow. Members of the troupe include Mary and Roy Romas, leapers, and Ralph Oyseth, catcher. Act made the Ward Bros. Shrine Circus tour this summer."<sup>10</sup>



Roy and his daughter, Kathy on Rex Allen's stallion, Koko.



From Boston to Canada: An October 28<sup>th</sup> *Billboard* note says, "Members of the Flying Romas were guests of Canada's largest race horse breeder and philanthropist, Charles Hemstead, who gifted Roy Valentine with a racing horse which Roy took to his Texas stables for the winter racing season."<sup>11</sup> Now, remember: Roy probably sent this note in.

Later in October they were in Newport, Tennessee at the Cocke County Fair where Mary did swinging ladder and they had their flying act. In Atlanta they performed for the Hamid-Morton Shrine Circus. November 18<sup>th</sup> they were at the International Stock Show, Fair and Rodeo in Pasadena, Texas. A November *Billboard* note stated, "Roy Romas took delivery on a Columbia, California house trailer and two more blooded Palomino stallions for the Romas Riding Range Dude Ranch in San Antonio. Maria Peters joined the act for the upcoming season."

An article from the Bloomington *Pantagraph*, dated February 4, 1950, went all over the country. One copy saved by George and Lorraine is from Los Angeles and its headline reads, "Flying Trapeze Acts Always Return 'Home' to Bloomington, Illinois." There is a photo of the Valentinos doing the passing trick. The caption reads, "The Flying Valentinos do their important winter practicing at the YMCA in Bloomington, cradle of flying trapeze acts. Here George Valentine tosses his wife, Lorraine, to the trapeze just vacated by Sue Peltó in a double passing trick that is one of the most difficult, rare tricks in the profession. One slip here and-good-by!"

The article discusses the early days of trapeze performers in Bloomington, and then the current ones:

"If you walk into the YMCA any week night in the off season you can see some of the troupes working out. On a recent night the Flying Valentinos had first turn on the rigging. George, the catcher, wrapped his legs about the padded catch bar and went into his human pendulum.

"Sue Peltó grasped a trapeze and stepped off her perch near the roof. She swung out, then back and up until her blonde head almost touched the ceiling. She swung down, let go, turned over twice and ended up in his steel grip. Lorraine, a lissome brunette, whizzed through the air on a trapeze. George peered at her. He uttered a tense cry: 'Up!' Lorraine hurled herself at him. He caught her and tossed her back to the trapeze. Why did he shout?

"She couldn't see. She had a burlap sack over

her head. They topped off the session with a passing trick. It went like this: George caught Lorraine. He tossed her back to the trapeze and caught Sue. Both girls were in the air at the same time."<sup>12</sup>

George, Lorraine and Sue left April 15<sup>th</sup> from Bloomington for Birmingham for the Warren Bros. Circus. June 22<sup>nd</sup> found them at one of their favorite places, Buckeye Lake Park in Ohio. In August and September, they performed in West Virginia, Kentucky and Indiana. This would be the last year for the Flying Valentinos because George's health was not good. He had to quit catching. He did not trust anyone else catching for Lorraine and Sue.<sup>13</sup>

Fred started the 1951 season in Chicago for the Cole Bros. Circus at the Stadium. The troupe went on to play Joyland Park in Lexington, Kentucky and the South Jersey State Fair & Expo in Camden, June 2-12. Nine days later they opened at Idlewild Park in Ligonier, Pennsylvania where Harry LaMar and his troupe visited them. A note in the June 23<sup>rd</sup> *Billboard* said, "Freddie Valentine Troupe replaced Bob Fisher's flying act for two weeks at Idlewild Park when one of Fisher's flyers was injured. Fred originally was scheduled to play the spot for 2 weeks beginning July 23."<sup>14</sup>

In August they were in Detroit for Police Field Day for the Ernie Young Agency. Then they traveled to Hershey Park in Pennsylvania, performing at 4:30 and 9:30 P.M.<sup>15</sup> In September, Freddie and members of his troupe visited the King Bros. Circus in Lumberton, North Carolina. A December 15<sup>th</sup> *Billboard* note said, "Freddie Valentine has been pinch-hitting the past five weeks for his nephew, Billy Glen, whose Flying LaVals closed at the Orrin Davenport Shrine Circus in Kansas City. Billy Glen is in the Army and stationed at Aberdeen, Maryland. Freddie plans to take his troupe out again after New Year's Day."<sup>16</sup>

Like Fred, Bill started the 1951 season at the Stadium in Chicago in April. From there they went to St. Louis for the Police Circus where they joined other notable performers like the Zacchins, the Anteleks, Harold Barnes and Kelly Miller elephants. A May ad in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* stated, "Daily on the Midway. The Flying LaVals. A crack trapeze quartet and features amiable South Hills' girl, Ginny Sheidter." The Flying LaVals were added to the Oklahoma City Polio Circus the week of June 30.<sup>17</sup>

On July 30, they opened in Circleville, Ohio for the Pickaway County Fair. A *Circleville Herald* article had the headline, "Showman Seeks Data on Kin." The article details the fact that Bill believed his grandfather, William H. Richards, may have come from the area. He had two photos of



him that were taken in Circleville galleries years ago. Bill's mother was Lizzie Richards and she died in 1938. He never did find information on his grandparents – and my great-grandparents. It would have been wonderful if someone had contacted him.

The LaVals were part of the grandstand show in Dayton, Ohio in September for their county fair which recorded a total attendance of 70, 947.<sup>18</sup> The first week in November they played the Wichita Shrine Circus.

For some reason, Roy didn't write much for the *Billboard* this year. A little note in the Carnival section dated May 5<sup>th</sup> said, "The Flying Romas joined Schafer's Carnival as a free act in Mount Pleasant, Texas." Soon thereafter the *Billboard* reported that Mr. and Mrs. Roy Valentine, and Ralph, their catcher, had joined the J.A. Gentsch Shows in Fulton, Kentucky. Looks like they didn't like the Schafer Carnival.

For 1951, Lorraine was booked either doing a single trapeze act or a web act. A September 19<sup>th</sup> *Daily News* article in Neosho, Iowa said, "On the Midway, several thousands of people gathered to see LaRayne, pretty aerialist who does

some breath-taking stunts." In her journal for that year she noted that she and George traveled to Detroit, Ohio, Iowa, and a lot of towns in Canada. Her journal doesn't only document itineraries, it notes expenses too. Like, in November there was an entry for \$4.50 to chrome plate a trapeze, and \$50 for a rigging and \$8 to chrome rings. Meanwhile, Sue had gone out that year with Lowell and Mary's flying act.<sup>19</sup>

Fred was heading to Japan in 1952 with the E.K. Fernandez All American Circus. An article from the March 20<sup>th</sup> issue of the Bloomington *Pantagraph* stated, "Bennie Gibson of Bloomington will start a six month circus tour of the Far East this month as a member of the Flying Valentines – a Houston aerialist troupe. The troupe is headed by Freddie Valentine, now of Houston, who with his brothers Bill, Roy and George, learned trapeze work at the YMCA gym here. Mr. Valentine has contracted for a 30 day indoor stand in Tokyo. Then they will do 30 days in Osaka, 15 days at Nagoya and 15 days at Kobe, all in Japan. The tour will continue with a month in Hong Kong, Manila and a month in the Hawaiian Islands. The troupe will then return to Houston. Both Mr. Valentine and Mr. Gibson are 23 year



Lowell and Mary Sherer with Sue Pelto, 1951.



veterans of this business.”<sup>20</sup> On April 3<sup>rd</sup>, they were playing at the Kokukigan Arena.

Turns out they didn’t stay in the Far East that long. A passenger list one month later shows that they sailed back on the S.S. Topa Topa to the port of San Francisco. They left Yokohama May 3<sup>rd</sup> and arrived 19 days later. On the passenger list were Fred, 42, Mary Ann Perry, 20, Barbara Winters, 19, and Bennie Gibson.<sup>21</sup> *Billboard* reported that Fred’s entire troupe returned with him after closing with the circus over salary differences.<sup>22</sup>

Benny Fox’s Star Spangled Circus at Camp Hood, Texas included the Flying LaVals, Mel Hall, Pallenberg’s Bears, Betty and Benny Fox, sky dancers, and Atterbury’s Beauties of the Air.<sup>23</sup> The March 15<sup>th</sup> issue of the *Billboard* had an article announcing that Fred’s Valentines, Bill’s Flying LaVals

and Roy’s Flying Romas would open April 18 with the Cole Circus in Chicago for a 17-day run. I wonder how they got along together for that engagement.

A write-up in the August 16, 1952 *Billboard* stated, “Freddie Valentine, who has been playing celebration and park dates for Cooke & Rose Agency since returning from Japan, opened with Tom Packs Thrill Circus in Pittsburgh. He closed in Boston mid-August and then will fulfill fair dates for the Ernie Young Agency.”<sup>24</sup> In late November they performed at the Shreveport Shrine Circus and the American Legion Show in Greenville, South Carolina.

The Dixon, Illinois *Evening Telegraph* of June 13<sup>th</sup> had a great photo of Bill, Billy Glen, Slick, and Ginny. They had been signed for the 99<sup>th</sup> Ogle County Fair August 30-September 1 and worked between racing heats despite the



The LaVals, the Valentines, with Jeep Milam and Frances Reiner, and the Romas together!



heavy rains that came the final day.

By mid-September 1952, the LaVals were performing in Nashville with Wagner's Cavalcade of Amusements. At the end of the season, in mid-November, they were with the Tom Packs Circus in Baton Rouge and New Orleans. There was a birth announcement in the November 22 *Billboard*. "A son, Gerald Ray, was born October 10 in Heights Hospital in Houston to Mr. and Mrs. William Valentine. His father is owner of the Flying LaVals and the catcher in the act." My cousin Gerald still lives in Houston.

Roy wrote *Billboard* February 23, 1952, "Roy and Mary Romas are at their headquarters in San Antonio getting things in shape to hit the road in early spring. They have been re-engaged by Tom Packs and are set to play the Chicago Stadium this season. They recently played host to Roy Rogers and Dale Evans and members of their troupe and all their horses, who stopped off at the Romas place for two days after the Houston Stock Show en route back to California."<sup>25</sup>

The March 15, 1952 *Billboard* carried an article on the Chicago Stadium's Cole Bros. opening – a 17-day run that would start April 18<sup>th</sup>. The flying acts included the Flying Valentines (held over from last year's lineup), Bill's Flying LaVals and Roy's Flying Romas. The brothers were flying together again.

There was an ad in the July 16<sup>th</sup> *Terre Haute Tribune* for the Zorah Shrine Temple Circus with 68 Titanic Acts in three rings and stages. The acts included Unus, the Triska Family, the Four Flying Zacchinis and the Four Flying Ro-



*The many names of Mary: Atterbury Valentine Romas.*

mas. A September 13<sup>th</sup> *Billboard* noted that the Romas were guests in Bob Morton's Philadelphia home.

A November 29, 1952 *Billboard* noted, "Oyseth Injured, Romas' Rigging Lost in Car Fire. Equipment and wardrobe of the Flying Romas was lost and Ralph Oyseth, catcher in the act received a hand injury when their car caught fire en route to the Shreveport Shrine Circus. Ralph severed a tendon in his right hand when he attempted to break a





*Cherie and Lorraine enjoy a moment.*

car window. The accident occurred near Hickory, Mississippi while the troupe was en route from Atlanta. Unable to work, the act was out of the show, and substituting was the LaBlonde Troupe, which arrived from Ohio.<sup>26</sup>

By November, Roy was starting out on a new adventure – as owner of “Royal Bros. Circus & Thrill Hippodrome Show.” The November 22, 1952 *Billboard* said, “Roy Valentine, has chalked up good business at all of their Southern Shrine dates. Personnel includes Mary Valentine, secretary, Mary Romas, aerial and wardrobe department, Billy Barton, single aerialist, Mary Atterbury, aerialist, Tex and Rose Romas, Western Ropers and riders, and the Flying Romas Troupe. Ralph Oyseth is arena director, Jim Curry, Maintenance Dept., Pat Parrish, web and ladders and Capt. James Curry, motorcycle and auto thrill show.”<sup>27</sup>

In 1952 Lorraine, Sue and George started a new adventure too. A note to the April 12<sup>th</sup> *Billboard* reported, “George Valentine, top man in the Flying Valentinos, has framed a new two-girl act to be known as the Valentino Sisters. The gals will do a double trap routine which is being smoothed out at their Normal, Illinois home. George

will manage the act.” They started in May in Canada with the Garden Bros. Circus and left Canada July 12<sup>th</sup> after performing in Welland, Ontario. They performed August 18-22 in Berne, Indiana.<sup>28</sup>

George sent the following note to the August 30<sup>th</sup> *Billboard*, “Cherie Diane Valentine, 3½ year old daughter of George and Lorraine Valentine, made her ‘show biz’ debut recently at the Berne, Indiana Celebration. Following the Valentino Sisters trapeze stint, little Cherie came out for her routine of trapeze tricks and stole the show.” For the rest of the season they traveled to Colorado and Nebraska.<sup>29</sup>

Fred started the 1953 season with the Frank Wirth Circus in Toledo for

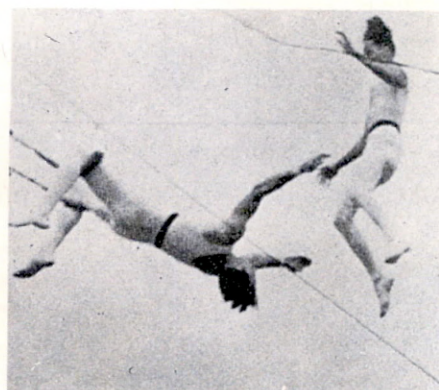
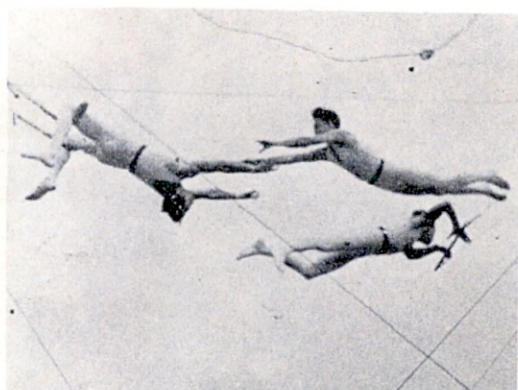
the first week in February. The April 4<sup>th</sup> *Billboard* reported, “Freddie Valentine’s four-people flying act ... has been set for the Rink Wright Shrine engagement in Omaha and the St. Louis Police Circus, another Wirth date.”<sup>30</sup>

The troupe then performed in Minneapolis, Omaha, and St. Louis.<sup>31</sup> St. Louis ran from April 23 to May 3<sup>rd</sup> and the flying acts were the Flying Valentines and the Flying LaForms. Cedar Point Park in Sandusky, Ohio welcomed them on June 20 as the Esmond Dairy Day Free act. They worked at 3:30 and 9:00 P.M. at the Grandstand where their act looked especially spectacular in the glare of spotlights at night. On June 20<sup>th</sup>, there is a neat photo of their passing trick. They were held over for a week.

Frank Wirth produced a talent-packed Shrine Circus in Alexandria, Virginia from August 19-22 and the Flying Valentines were with it. They filled out the rest of the year in Virginia, New Jersey, North Carolina and Texas, playing last at Orrin Davenport’s Arabia Shrine Circus in Houston.

International reports of circuses came in March from none other than Bill’s son: “Pvt. William G. Valentine, for-



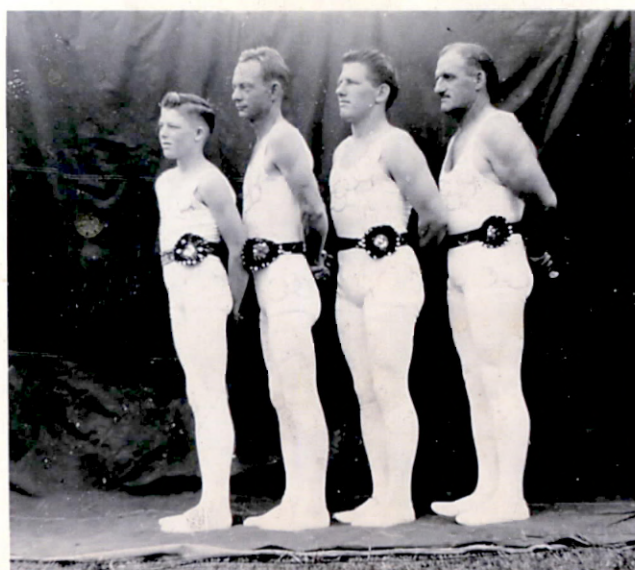


# *The Flying La Val's*

FEATURING

## *Slick*

**WORLD'S YOUNGEST ARTIST ON THE FLYING TRAPEZE**





merly of the Flying LaVals and now stationed in Germany, has been visiting European circuses. He recently caught Circus Krone in Munich and reports a good program. He also visited Circus Brumbach in its quarters at Ingelstadt. Valentine reports that owner Gustav Brumbach is related to Mrs. Fritz Huber, of the Sensational Kays.<sup>32</sup>

Thousands flocked to see the The Flying LaVals when they opened April 6, 1953 at the Cincinnati Gardens for the Syrian Temple Cole Bros. Circus.<sup>33</sup> Also on the program were Leo Hamilton, Equestrian Director, Jack Cervone's Band, Valentine's trampoline, Elly Ardely, balancing and head stand trapeze, Gretonas high wire, Terrell Jacobs' cats, Gibson's Hollywood Sky Ballet and also the Flying Siegrists. Bill and Roy were performing once again in the same show – this time with the Flying Siegrists.

An April 25<sup>th</sup> issue of the Chicago *American* newspaper heralded a LaVal flyer injury with a photo of Bill and the young injured flyer, Frances Rooks, who would be grounded for several months after a bad fall. "Miss Rooks, 22, of Houston, swung from a bar but missed her perch in the final act of the Cole Bros. Circus. She fell 40 feet to the edge of the net, which bounced her up 20 feet and into the ring. Her right ankle was fractured and the bones of her wrist chipped."<sup>34</sup>

On May 24<sup>th</sup> the LaVals performed on the *Super Circus* TV show with the Machino Troupe and in June, they played a lot of Illinois towns. A big ad was in the Mount Vernon, Illinois *Register-News* for the Shrine Circus at the Fairgrounds on June 19<sup>th</sup>. Other performers included the Wallendas, The Flying Edmonds, Miss Rietta, The Bouncing Valentines, trampoline, Professor George Keller, Hawthorn's bears, Capt. Joe Lemke's College of Chimps for one performance at 8:30 P.M. What a line-up for one show!

At the end of June, they performed in St. Louis for the Shrine Circus. A July 18<sup>th</sup> *Billboard* noted "Rose Behee, substituting in the flying act, received a fractured nose and other injuries when she missed a triple to the net. She was able to return to the act."<sup>35</sup>

During the summer, the LaVals worked Mount Pleasant, Pennsylvania for the Eddie's Expo Shows, the Madisonville, Kentucky Shrine Circus, and by October 5<sup>th</sup>, opened in Atlanta for the Southeastern Fair. Wilson Storey, of the Pan American Booking Agency, was the agent. Bill provided a trampoline with the Valentinos, plus the Flying LaVals. The brothers sure liked using George's flying act name!

Come November, Bill and company were in Natchez, Mississippi for the Tom Packs Circus, Baton Rouge and New Orleans. *Billboard* noted, "North met South in the

middle of a Thanksgiving Dinner at Houston when Mrs. Bill Valentine filled half of the bird with Southern corn-bread dressing and Mrs. Jimmie Troy filled the other half with Yankee dressing."<sup>36</sup>

Roy started his 1953 season February 17<sup>th</sup> in Kingston, Ontario with the Polack Eastern Circus. (I believe Mary and Roy split at the end of the 1952 season. Lorraine told Gossard in their 1985 interview that after Mary left, Roy eventually married Pat Bowers. They were together until about 1970.) From Canada, he went to White Plains and Roanoke. He reported vandalism in the *Billboard* in March – someone cut ropes and the net on the flying act's rigging, and let five horses out while they were practicing in Houston. Nevertheless, the Flying Romas performed in Wilkes-Barre, Flushing, Erie, and Clarksburg, West Virginia that month.

After a brief visit to Bloomington, the Romas continued playing Midwestern indoor circus dates and fairs before appearing at celebrations in Kentucky and Tennessee. After their *Super Circus* television show appearance in Chicago, Roy assembled his Royal Bros. Circus for a string of ball park and stadium dates.<sup>37</sup>

The Valentino Sisters, Lorraine and Sue, traveled to Omaha for the Shrine Circus in April. In the *World-Herald* newspaper on April 8, 1953, the headline was, "Cherie, Just 4 Years Old, on Trapeze 4 Years." There were two accompanying photos – one photo was taken in Omaha when I was only four months old, hanging from the rings, and the other photo was of me doing a "bird's nest" on the trapeze ropes, with George and Lorraine holding onto the bar.

The article said, "Four years ago, Cherie learned to swing from a trapeze while her parents were performing in a flying act at the Shrine Circus. This week, she is back in Omaha as a full-fledged performer for the Shrine Circus. Cherie went on the road last summer after 1½ years of daily practice. Cherie already is being tutored in the three R's by her mother. Her father says 'that when she reaches school age, she'll continue on the road, getting four or more hours of tutoring a day from her mother as they travel.'"<sup>38</sup>

That date was followed by the St. Louis Police Circus. That summer they performed in Illinois, Michigan, and Ohio and by September 28<sup>th</sup>, were back home in Bloomington for the Community Chest Fund Dinner Show on the Wesleyan campus. They closed the season December 19, in Dayton, at the Coliseum Fairgrounds.<sup>39</sup>

Fred was booked into the Hartford Shrine Circus for the start of his 1953 season. Dick Clemens, from Pekin, Illinois, also performed in the circus with his lions. Fred's





Lorraine, Cherie, and Sue – I eventually got a matching costume to theirs.

troupe did a *Big Top* TV show, in April that was televised May 15. By July, they were performing in Bowling Green. The July 10 *Billboard* lists the Houston-based members of the troupe as Bennie Gibson, Barbara Winters, Freddie Valentine and Don Winters. They joined the Marks Carnival for three fair dates in September<sup>40</sup> and closed their outdoor season November 14 at the Greater Jacksonville, Florida Fair.<sup>41</sup>

Bill's Flying LaVals were in St. Louis on June 5<sup>th</sup>, then

traveled to Cape Girardeau, Missouri for the Tom Packs Circus where they also performed on the trampoline. There was a big article in the *Nashville Tennessean* June 6, advertising the Al Menah Temple Shrine Circus coming June 9-13 with the Tom Packs Circus. It was to be an open-air circus. The LaVals and the Flying Zacchinis were the flying acts. Jack Joyce had his camels and John Cuneo had his 14 bears.

The next contract for the LaVals was with Tom Packs' Southern Illinois Shrine Circus followed by one working the Big Shrine Circus in Carbondale, a stint in Evansville, Indiana and one in St. Louis for the Moolah Shrine Circus at the Public Schools Stadium. Fireworks followed this big show of four rings and six stages.

The *Terre Haute Tribune* gave some tips for understanding trapeze when they reported in their July 4, 1954 issue:

"If you want to be able to discuss the flying trapeze as though you were informed on the subject, you should also know what each performer is called.

The man who swings out by his knees and catches people is called, aptly enough, the catcher. Those who fly through the air are called leapers. When they're not leaping, they're on the board. The trapeze is called the bar, and the whole thing is called the rigging, or rig, for short.

"According to the Flying Zacchinis and the Flying LaVals, featured trapezists with the Zorah Shrine Circus at the Memorial Stadium, who do



some well-calculated leaping from the bar to the catcher and return to the board via the bar, a lot of young boys and girls want to fly through the air, but when they find out it takes years of hard work, they turn around and walk away. They want to learn the intricate tricks overnight.

"Most of the flying trapeze tricks are basic and included in every artist's repertoire. Such, for instance, as the somersault and the double somersault. The Zacchinis and La Vals also include a trick which is known among trapeze artists as the 'Flifus.' This is a stunt in which the leaper does a somersault and a half twist and grabs hold of a bar which is held by the catcher as he swings out hanging by his knees. The trick, originated 25 years ago, is currently performed by few groups.

"Their *piece de resistance* is, however, a two-and-a half somersault from the bar in which the leaper is caught by his feet as he comes hurtling down. This is what the trade calls an 'instinct trick'. So called because the leaper loses every sense of direction after completing a double somersault. After that everything is strictly instinctive. It not only takes years of training, they say, but it takes good co-ordination, perfect timing, good physical condition, good nerves, plenty of courage and, one of the most important requisites, they believe, a desire to do it. So, if you want to be the man, or woman, on the flying trapeze, there's the secret of success."<sup>42</sup>

The Flying LaVals performed July 23-24 in Indianapolis at Victory Field. The August 7<sup>th</sup> *Billboard* reported, "After intermission the Flying Zacchinis and LaVals work simultaneously. They do double full twisters and passing leaps for good results. Some of the impact was lost here because, though there was a special announcement at the first of the act, there was neither announcement nor fanfare at the beginning of the feature tricks. Positioning of the rigging on the field was such that this added attention was needed. Appearing were the Cisco Kid and Pancho. They personally gave a photo to each kid in the audience."

And in August, they appeared in West Virginia. The October 16<sup>th</sup> *Billboard* reported Bill's son, Billy Glen, married Joannie Letty, an aerialist and bareback rider with the show in Little Ferry, New Jersey. The act went on to play Natchez, Baton Rouge, and New Orleans until the close of the season.

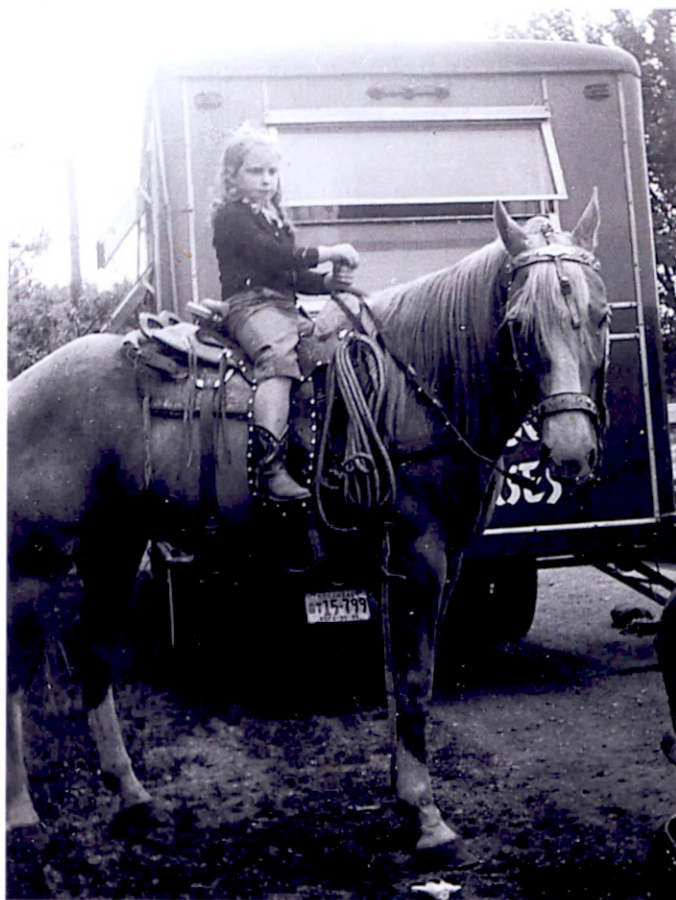
Roy's troupe performed in Pittsburgh April 19-21, 1954 followed by the Hamid-Morton Circus in Harrisburg at the

Farm Arena. A *Billboard* note of May 8, 1954 also noted the members of the troupe – Bob Justice, catcher, and Pat Douglas, Jackie Gibson and Roy Valentine, leapers – and the fact that they featured an under and over blindfolded passing leap to finish their act.<sup>43</sup>

The rest of May they played towns in Canada in a revival of the outside Free Act. "Management reported to the June 5<sup>th</sup> *Billboard* it was satisfactory, although circuses have not used the Free Act idea for many years." In June, Roy was performing with his horse as well as in the Flying Romas Troupe<sup>44</sup> and in September, Roy was injured in his horse act in Gainesville, Texas. Billy Woods replaced him in the flying act.<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps it was Roy's injury which made it impossible for the Romas to perform at the end of September in Lubbock for the Panhandle South Plains Fair. They were replaced by the Flying LaMars.<sup>46</sup>

An October 23, 1954 *Billboard* noted the addition of George Leach, wire walker and juggler, to Roy Valentine's Royal Bros. Circus. They played in Florida and Mississippi after that. A November 13<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Billboard* reported, "The Flying Romas Troupe is currently performing at



Cherie and Trigger, motion picture stallion.



the Gulf Hills Country Club in Ocean Springs, Mississippi. They had their contract renewed for another four weeks at the club. Royal Bros. Circus personnel playing the date include Bob Justice, Cherie North, George Lerch, wire-walking juggler, Helene Demoy, webs, Rich Eddins, trick rider and boss hostler, Pat Douglas, ladders and Trigger, motion picture stallion.<sup>47</sup>

In December, they worked for the Tom Pack's Circus in New Orleans, and closed in Fort McClellan, Alabama. After closing, Roy Valentine went to his Double R Ranch in San Antonio.

Lorraine and Sue opened their 1954 season in mid-January in Indianapolis for the Knights of Columbus. In March, they went to the military base in Cherry Point, North Carolina. Sue said in an interview with the Illinois State University's newspaper, the *Vidette*, "My most thrilling experience was performing at the Navy Base in Cherry Point, North Carolina. Our act was one of three chosen to perform at the officer's club."<sup>48</sup>

In mid-April, they performed in Cincinnati for the Cole Bros. Circus. Throughout the summer they appeared in many Illinois towns, including Pontiac where Miss Lorraine performed a high web act, Miss Cherie performed on her single trapeze and the Valentino Sisters on their double one. By the end of October, the Valentino Sisters were in Gary, Indiana for the Optimist Club. One of the acts was Lady Barbara and her dogs and ponies along with one little monkey. Well, while we were getting ready to go on, I was feeding the monkey on the pony popcorn, and he didn't want anymore, but I kept trying to give him some... and he bit me! I remember I was bleeding, but mom put a bandage on my finger, and I went on to perform my trapeze act. I'm sure mom said, "The show must go on!" In November and December, they stayed close to home and performed in a lot of Illinois towns and five dates in Bloomington.<sup>49</sup>

In 1955, Fred and company were at the Buffalo Shrine Circus in early spring.<sup>50</sup> His flying act was joined by the Flying Marilees. I bet that was a little awkward since Mary Valentine of the Marilees was his ex-sister-in-law.

After Buffalo, The Valentines made a repeat performance on the *Big Top* TV show,<sup>51</sup> and then worked in Hartford for the Frank Wirth Shrine Circus. May 21<sup>st</sup>, they joined the Rogers Bros. Circus in Paducah. The show carried both Fred and Roy's acts.

September 6<sup>th</sup> they opened in Arendtsville, Pennsylvania at the 32<sup>nd</sup> Annual South Mountain Fair at the Memorial Auditorium at the Fairgrounds. By October, they were working at American Legion Post 580's Fall Fiesta Novem-

ber 7-12, 1955 in Aransas Pass, Texas.<sup>52</sup>

In the March 5, 1955 issue of *Billboard* it was announced that Bill's Flying LaVals act and the Valentine's Trampoline act would play summer and fall dates for the E.R. Braly Circus' Southern Unit. Before that, in April, they worked at the Cincinnati Gardens for the Cole Bros. Circus. Next came the St. Louis Annual Police Circus. In May, they were at West View Park in Pittsburgh then those E.R. Braly dates in Illinois, Indiana and Ohio and Pennsylvania.

By November, they were at the Houston Shrine Circus with John Andrew as Producer.<sup>53</sup> In Houston and later, Fort Worth, the opening Spec was Arabian Nights. Other acts included Victor Julian's Dogs, Jack Joyce's Camels, The Therons, Chet Juszcz's Jungle Wild Animals, Miller and Woodcock Elephants, the Honey Girls and the Flying Hartzells.

Roy inaugurated change with the new year. The January 1, 1955 issue of the *Billboard* reported, "Roy Romas flew to New Orleans recently from his Double R Ranch in San Antonio to purchase a 35-foot trailer and tractor. Title of Romas' show will be changed temporarily to Royal Bros. Dude Ranch Shows. All equipment is being overhauled. The Flying Romas Troupe and Trigger will again be featured."<sup>54</sup>

Roy made sure *Billboard* knew where he was, what he was doing and who he was doing things with, with reports like this: "Roy Romas was a holiday guest of Roxy Engesser at the Houston home of her parents Mr. and Mrs. George Engesser of the Schell Bros. Circus. En route home to San Antonio, Roy stopped over in Gonzales, Texas to visit with Ben Davenport, and Corky Plunkett, formerly with the Dailey Bros. Circus. Romas' show is slated to open in Ocean Springs, Mississippi."<sup>55</sup> A March 5<sup>th</sup> *Billboard* report said, "While in Gonzales, Roy purchased some truck-trailers and ménage horses. Roy advises that his horses and other acts will start their usual trek toward the Army Camps in Mississippi and Louisiana with the Royal Show."<sup>56</sup>

Further show improvements were noted in the March 19, 1955 issue of *Billboard*, "Roy Romas said his Royal Bros. Dude Ranch Show has bought an elephant which formerly was part of the Powers Elephant Act and will be worked by Tom Powers. Roy also bought a ménage horse from Ben Davenport."<sup>57</sup> Roy's Troupe played Greenville, Mississippi and Paducah, Kentucky in May with the Rogers Bros. Circus and a note says Fred joined the show, too.

Pat Douglas, of the Flying Romas, was hospitalized at Greenville, Mississippi following a fall from the trapeze<sup>58</sup> but Pat Romas and Buddy Brewer were soon practicing new leaps while Joyce Kuhn was breaking in.<sup>59</sup>



Rogers Bros. Circus folded July 4<sup>th</sup> in Terre Haute. Roy opened with the Parker Bros. Circus July 8<sup>th</sup> in Menominee, Michigan but two days later, on July 10<sup>th</sup>, in Ishpeming, Michigan, Parker Bros. Circus folded.

The *Billboard* of September 3, 1955 had a note from Bloomington, "Roy said he would re-open his Royal Bros. Dude Ranch Show this month. He said Roxy Engesser is booking stands for the later part of the month. Most personnel of the show are in Bloomington preparing for the re-opening. The show also made a spring tour, which closed at Plymouth, Indiana. With the spring show were Gee Gee Engesser's Alaskan Huskies, Capt. Eddie Kuhn's animal acts, Billy Powell's wire act, and the Flying Royals. Vades Engesser has the office and tickets. He said Shell Oil Company will use a picture of his brother George's Flying Valentinos passing leap photo in connection with an upcoming advertising campaign."<sup>60</sup> By October 8<sup>th</sup>, Roy was playing the Baytown Fair in Baytown, Texas. A lot had happened in Roy's life that year.

The Valentino Sisters opened the 1955 season January 3 in Columbus, Ohio for the Warren Bros. Circus in Memorial Hall. Also on the program were the Antaleks, the Theron Troupe, bicycles, Consuelo, the Sill Sisters, aerial and Cimses Collies. On January 7<sup>th</sup> they performed in Belle Isle, Michigan at the Detroit Yacht Club, and in February, they played several dates in Bloomington. In March they played some dates in Canada.<sup>61</sup>

April meant they were back in Omaha for their Shrine Circus. On May 29, they played the *Super Circus* TV show with LaRayne in Chicago, and on August 9<sup>th</sup> they performed at the McLean County Fair in Bloomington at the Farm Bureau Field as the Grandstand Attraction. Later in August, they traveled to Des Moines for the Iowa State Fair.<sup>62</sup>

George was having more health problems as the year went on. On September 24, 1955, Lorraine noted in her journal, "Last date George worked." The simple notation for Saturday October 8<sup>th</sup> says, "Daddy passed away, 1 a.m." and an entry for October 11 reads, "Daddy's funeral 2 P.M. Beautiful day."<sup>63</sup> Now Lorraine and Sue would not only have to learn to book their act for themselves but they also would have to set up the rigging by themselves.

But Lorraine always said, "The show must go on," so, on October 15<sup>th</sup>, Lorraine, Sue, and myself traveled to Logansport, Indiana to perform at the Shrine Circus. In November they performed in Illinois and Wisconsin and in December they performed in Battle Creek for the Kellogg's Christmas Party. They closed their season December 29<sup>th</sup>



*Cherie performs her neck swivel while Lorraine styles.*

in Manteno, Illinois.<sup>64</sup>

Illinois State University's Milner Library's Special Collections has the correspondence files of Al Dobritch, the circus booking agent. In these files are letters written to Al from both Fred and Bill Valentine. The letters date from 1956 to 1960. Fred wrote from Houston on April 7, 1956, "Dear Friend, Al: Please advise the best price you can afford for the Des Moines Shrine Circus. Wish to advise that we will repeat for our third straight year at the New Haven and Hartford Shrine indoor circus engagements for the Frank Wirth office, dates being April 21-28."

"Please check the statement that we are the ONLY flying act to present the forward-over somersault passing leap with bird nests return, besides the Flying Harolds on the Polack Bros. Eastern Unit. Can you set my troupe on *Super Circus* for Sunday, May 13<sup>th</sup>, also, the best price? Any dates in the Eastern territory for June and July? P.S. Can my rigging be set on the *Ed Sullivan Show*?"

Al sent a letter back to Freddie in Houston, from the Hotel Delmonico in New York City, on April 10<sup>th</sup>, "Dear



Friend, Advise how many people in your flying act consist and what's your minimum net salary for the Des Moines date, four shows."

Shortly before the exchange of these letters *Billboard* reported that Clyde Bros. completed its Texas routes and that the Flying Valentines were with it.<sup>65</sup>

Back in the 1930s Fred took George's letterhead and changed it to his own. He changed Flying Valentinos to Flying Valentin's. Roy must have used this too, as the return address was in Dakota City, Nebraska because that was Roy's address at one time. Fred added "Three Young Men" to the letterhead and left everything else the same. He wrote to Al on April 13, 1956 from Houston, "Dear Al, since hearing

from Mr. Wirth, he has offered Springfield, Massachusetts Shrine Circus for their dates of May 18-20 which puts us in close to our closing at *Big Top* on May 5<sup>th</sup>. There is a hold up on the deal as he has offered the date for only \$375 and I am asking \$500 so I do not know if he is going to meet my price. Des Moines is a long jump from Philadelphia. Can you set *Super Circus* for May 13<sup>th</sup>? Thanking you in advance, Freddie Valentine." Unfortunately, the letters in the collection don't take up again until early 1957.

Fred did go to New Haven and Hartford for the Frank Wirth Circus and in the Bloomington's *Pantagraph* on May 5, 1956, is a TV listing for *Big Top* which read, "Featured will be the Flying Valentines, headed by Freddie Valentine,



Fred, unidentified, Slick and Bill Valentine.



of Bloomington. His act is playing with the Shrine Circus in Philadelphia." At the end of May, Freddie performed for the Frank Wirth Circus in Boston, and by August, his act was performing with the Griggs Brothers Carnival as the Free Act on the midway<sup>66</sup> for seven fairs in Kentucky.

October 1 through 6, they were at the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Fall Festival in Lilbourn, Missouri with the Mound City Shows. An article in the Sikeston, Missouri *Standard-Democrat* reported, "One of the features of next week's festivities will be the free act secured for the enjoyment of those who attend the event. This year, the local Kiwanis and Firemen have secured the services of the Flying Valentines, an adventurous quartet of trapeze artists. The troupe is headed by Fred Valentine. Working with him is his husky catcher, Ben Gibson, dark and pretty Miss Barbara Winters, and her 20-year-old brother, Don, the younger of the troupe."<sup>67</sup> They performed at 10:00 P.M.

Bill's troupe opened February 25, 1956 in Minneapolis. The Bloomington *Pantagraph* reported that an 18 year-old aerialist who took two 30-foot tumbles at the Shrine Circus would fly again. "Miss Jackie Gibson of Bloomington, fell into a net both times Saturday night, but on the second fall, she was knocked unconscious. For a while Sunday, her condition was listed as poor. Monday, x-rays showed she suffered no serious injuries. 'I'm just sore all over,' she said. She fell when she missed a mid-air catch at the hands of Bill Valentine, part of the act known as the Flying LaVals. Valentine said Jackie wants to 'fly again.' The girl, herself, said her ambition is to perform a triple somersault in the air."<sup>68</sup>

In an April 7, 1956 letter to Al Dobritch Bill wrote, "Will be unable to play the date that you are advertising in the *Billboard* but would like to give you my route in case that you may have some future dates, that you could use my flying act on. Will be at home until April 18<sup>th</sup> then Kankakee, Illinois April 23-28, then open until May 10<sup>th</sup>, then we open in Canada till July 21<sup>st</sup>, then open again." Unfortunately, that was the only letter for 1956 in the collection.

The LaVals played Canada through May and June for Clyde Bros. Circus and Schenectady, New York in mid-July. A *Daily Gazette* article from there described a featured trick as a double pass-over trick performed blindfolded. By September, they were in Winnfield and Shreveport, Louisiana. Other performers were the Wallendas, St. Leon Troupe, teeterboard, Tony and Inga Smaha, Mike Gaska, clown, and the Whiz Kids cycling with dad Mel Hall.<sup>69</sup>

A nice photo of Slick and two girls was in the Lincoln, Nebraska's paper – part of the caption reads, "They are so good they do a pulse-tingling double pass-over trick while

all participants are blindfolded."<sup>70</sup> November 2-4, they performed with the Clyde Bros. Circus for the Second Annual LaCrosse Shrine Circus in Wisconsin.<sup>71</sup>

A November 3<sup>rd</sup> *Billboard* note from Roy said, "The Romas have played fairs in Minnesota, Seattle, Portland, and California this year. They will play the Shrine show in Hawaii for Wally Yee in February and they plan to return to Los Angeles later for motion picture work. With the Romas are Pat Douglas, Jeep Milan, Billy Alexander, Buddy Brewer, Julian Austin and Jackie Gibson. The Bill Dunn's are to be with the Romas for the 1957 season."<sup>72</sup>

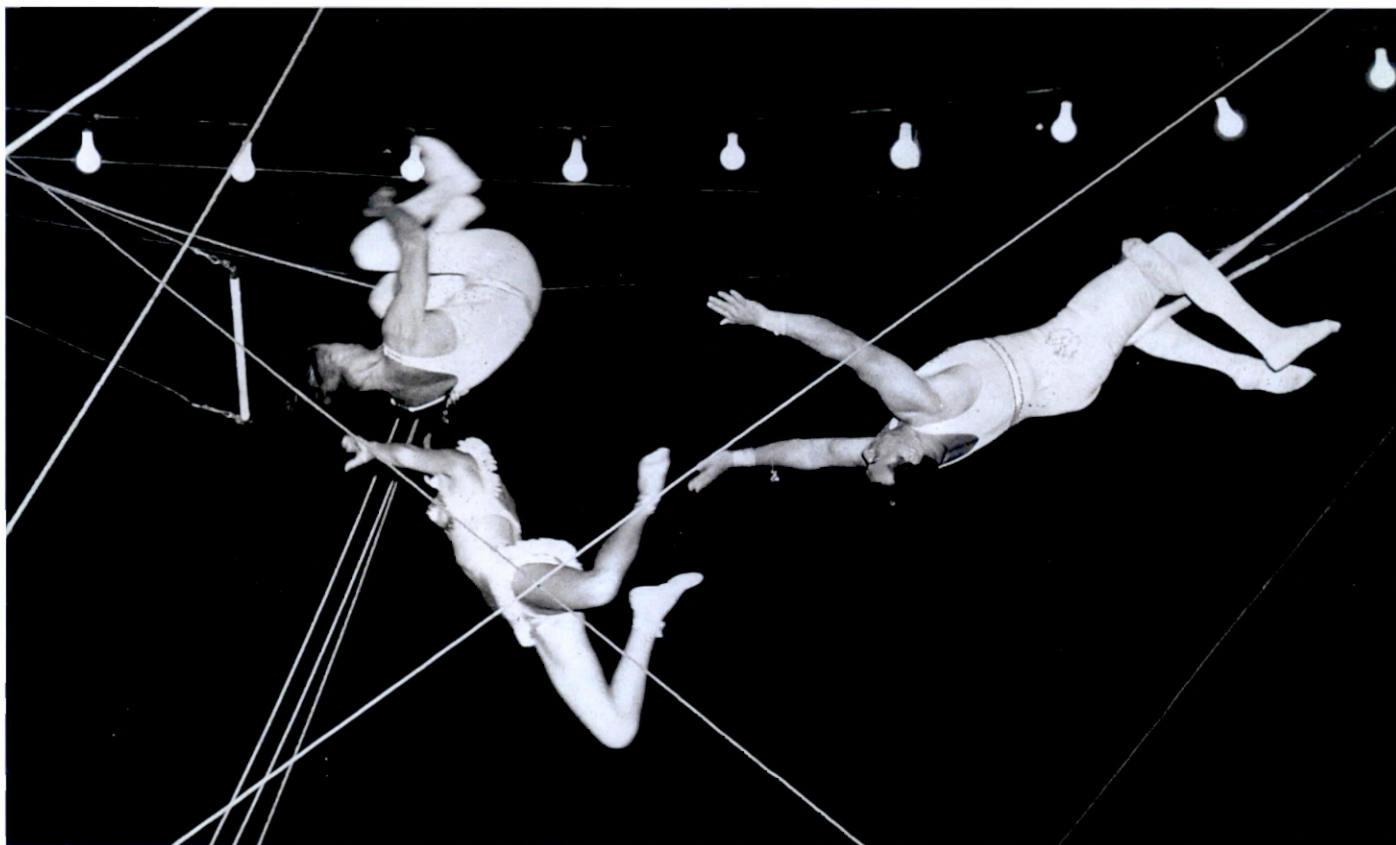
According to Lorraine's journal for 1956, the Valentino Sisters started the year playing close to home in January and February. Once again, in mid-April, they returned to the Omaha Shrine Circus at the City Auditorium. Other acts were Tom Pack's elephants with Jo Madison, Jack Joyce's camels, llamas and zebras, the Wallendas, Flying Dieslers, Rudynoff horses and the Luvas Sisters with 12 web girls. Into the fall and early winter, they performed in Illinois and Indiana, ending the year in Indiana Harbor, Indiana for the United Steel Workers.

Freddie wrote a February 19, 1957 letter to Al Dobritch from his home in Houston. "Dear Al, please advise if you can fit my act [The Valentines] into your Des Moines show. We hold contracts to a repeat engagement at the Omaha Shrine Circus the week of April 29<sup>th</sup>. Our opening is here in Houston March 22<sup>nd</sup> and we are in rehearsal at the present writing." Al wrote back on March 9<sup>th</sup>, "Dear Freddie, Advise if you are available for the Buffalo Shrine Circus April 22 thru the 27<sup>th</sup>. Quote minimum salary. Also, let me know three of the main routines you do at present in your flying act. How much do you want for the Des Moines date?"

Freddie wrote again to Al May 20<sup>th</sup> from Elizabethtown, Kentucky, "Am enclosing a program whereby we substituted and the act went over best on the program there at the Leamington, Canada Shrine show. Have four people, the main tricks we do is one and a half to the feet, double, single twister, pirouettes returns, etc. The passing trick is done ONLY by two other flying acts like ours and that is the Marilee's and the Harold's. Would appreciate if you will advise whether or not you can fill in the open time for the month of June." Of course, the Marilee's was headed by Roy's ex, Mary. There were no more letters for this year in the Milner Collection for Freddie.

In 1957, Freddie's troupe often entertained folks at drive-in theaters. In April, they played in Corpus Christi at the Gulf Drive-In, as reported in the *Caller-Times*, April 3<sup>rd</sup>. The movies were *Trapeze* and *Little Big Horn*.<sup>73</sup> By June,





Freddie's act performing the passing leap.

they were in Shelbyville, Indiana at the Skyline Drive-In where the movies playing were *The Broken Star*, *Hot-Rod Girl*, and *Girls in Prison*.<sup>74</sup> And by mid-October, the Flying Valentines were in Freeport, Tennessee at the Surf Drive-In as the intermission act. The movies playing there were *3 Ring Circus* and *Trapeze*.<sup>75</sup> The theaters advertised the flying act along with their ads for the movies.

A December 8, 1957 *Billboard* note said about happenings in Bloomington, "Harold Ramage, a friend of flying acts, is completing a list of flyers and flying acts and recently got a list of names from Freddie Valentine, who was aided by Bob Porter, Harold Ward and Mike Malko."

The Flying LaVals opened the 1957 season March 1-25 in San Juan, Puerto Rico with the James R. Harrington's Gran Circo Pan Americano.<sup>76</sup> The headline "Packs Western Announces Acts" was in the April 29<sup>th</sup> *Billboard*<sup>77</sup> and in May, they joined the Clyde Bros. Circus at the Ontario Memorial Gardens, performing at 4:00 and 8:00 P.M. Later in May there were in Ottawa, Ontario for the Ottawa Junior Board of Trade.

The first week in October found the thrilling Flying LaVals working as the free act for Sikeston, Missouri's "Lil-bourn's 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Homecoming."<sup>78</sup> In late November, Bill

and his troupe were in New Orleans with the Tom Packs Circus.

As Roy predicted, he opened in February 1957 in Honolulu with the Shrine Circus for Wally Yee, Producer. He was using the Flying Royals name. With the act were Roy's wife Pat, Janice and Red Holman. I have a photo of them there and Roy has his ribs bandaged pretty tightly. He and his troupe worked the Honolulu Shrine Circus from February 19 to March 9 and then they played 19 additional days on other islands, ending April 17. Other performers included the Albert Zoppé family, Tiny Gallagher, trapeze, Ala Ming, wire, Dick Clemens, wild animals, Gerald Soule, trapeze, Count Nicholas, Ringmaster. Phil Escalante had the wardrobe department and also props.<sup>79</sup>

A February 17, 1957 *Billboard* reported, "Roy Romas tells of seeing several flyers on the West Coast, among them Harold Ward, Red Holman, Jeep Milam, Francis Reiner, Bill Dunn, Eddie Kohl, Jack Bray and Billy Alexander, many of them working in movie studios thru connection with Eddie Allen, former bull man." More than eight months later, Roy was working at the Fort Worth Shrine Circus at the Will Rogers' Memorial Coliseum – still using the Flying Royals name, and sharing the bill with the Flying Malkos.





*Roy with his ribs wrapped tightly in Honolulu, February, 1957 – with wife Pat and Janice and “Red” Holman on Wally Yee’s Shrine Circus.*

In those intervening months they had used the name Royal Bros. Circus and had played fairs. Roy ended the year with a smaller unit of his Royal Bros. Circus playing Christmas dates at Army camps in Texas.<sup>80</sup>

The Valentino Sisters played close to home again in 1957, performing in Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa and Michigan. They closed the year in Bloomington for the G.E. Christmas Show at the McBarnes Building, with Dee Dee Dawn, Jimmy O’Neil, Lee & Rita Henneberry and Jack Rand.<sup>81</sup>

Fred wrote Al Dobritch once again from Houston March 8, 1958. “Dear Al, please advise if you can use my

act of one girl and three men at the Des Moines Shrine date. We are booked at Fort Worth for May 15-17 therefore can make you a good price to follow up, as Des Moines is just north of Fort Worth and the dates would blend in very nicely. We appear at the Buccaneer Days Celebration in Corpus Christi April 7-12. Ernie Young just sent me contracts for Fargo and Omaha. J. C. Michaels Attractions of Kansas City are playing us for fairs commencing in early August.” There was no reply letter in the collection at Milner Library.

A March 13<sup>th</sup> letter from Fred to Al reads, “Your air-mail letter of the 11th received, and wish to thank you for



the same. In reply, can make you a low price of \$450 less 10% commission to you. I furnish four people. No, we have never appeared at the Des Moines Shrine Circus. The last time we appeared in Des Moines was at the Riverview Park in 1937. Please bear in mind I transport a van body ton and a half truck with house trailer and car to transport four people and riggings and we will be coming into Des Moines from Fort Worth which is a large jump in itself. Photos will be shipped upon receiving contracts immediately."

Fred wrote finally to Al October 4, 1958 from Natchez, Mississippi. "Your letter received and wish to thank you for the same. In reply, will list below the following questions as you numbered them. 1) Yes, my troupe is available; 2) 1953, 3) The St. Louis Police Circus. Salary \$100 per day, net. Photos being sent under separate cover. Trust this is the necessary information."

I believe Bill retired from the flying act around 1957-1958, but continued to be the manager of his act. A small note in the May 19, 1958 *Billboard* said, "Roselena Valentine, daughter of the Bill Valentine's, who has the Flying La-Vals trapeze act, graduates from high school in Houston, May 28, and will join her dad's flying act." In 1958, Slick had his own flying act on the Cristiani Bros. Circus.

A February 3, 1958 *Billboard* note said, "Scheduled to be on the Royal Bros. Circus unit are Perry Luth, Tex Mays, Bennie Gibson, Roy Romas, Pat Douglas, and Bill Valentine, as well as others." So, Roy was still working his circus this year. I believe he must have retired this year, as the *Billboard* didn't carry any of his writings that I could find after 1958. Roy and Pat had several children and perhaps they retired from the road to raise their family. In 1960, he and Pat were living in North Carolina and she was a waitress in an Italian restaurant and he was a carpenter for Rea Construction.

Lorraine was now booking other acts for dates around Illinois and also became an Avon sales lady. In April they went out to the Omaha Shrine Circus, and played Illinois and Indiana towns.<sup>82</sup> Sue Peltó quit the double trapeze act of the Valentino Sisters in 1958. She said in an Illinois State University *Vidette* interview, "People used to enjoy watching me and Lorraine haul out our rigging as much as they enjoyed the show." She said she quit while she was still good at her act, but mostly, she quit because she was disheartened by the death of a fellow trapeze performer killed during a performance. "I figure when it's your time to go, you're going to go, but this death saddened me greatly."<sup>83</sup>

(I believe the performer Sue is speaking about was Ethel D'Arcy who performed a high pole act. Her proper name



*Ethel D'Arcy publicity still.*

Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections

was Ethel Marine Hamilton and she was married to Leo Hamilton. Her sister was Agnes Doss, a former performer, who lived in Bloomington. *The Lead Call Daily* of Lead, South Dakota from July 5, 1957, page one reported, "Death Ends Final Show at Roundup." July 4<sup>th</sup>, From Belle Fourche, South Dakota: "Ethel D'Arcy fell 82 feet to the ground when the 72 foot pole she was performing on broke. 1500 spectators, including the Governor, watched in stunned silence. She was doing a foot push-out when the rigging broke.

Her foot was still in the loop of the perch pole when she struck the ground. Her husband was operating the lights which illuminated the act. The equipment will be ex-



amined by her two brothers, (of Bloomington), who are the riggers to determine the cause.”)

Fred had a lot of correspondence with his booking agent, Al Dobritch, in 1959. He wrote Al from his home in Houston January 14<sup>th</sup>. “Dear Al, I have your letter asking questions from last September 26<sup>th</sup> past, whereby you asked questions, asked for photos and newspaper clippings. The questions were answered, the photos and newspaper clippings were sent, and at this writing no answer forthcoming from your office. My brother Bill was over today and he told me you wrote him a letter asking for his best price for our St. Louis and Cincinnati indoor dates. I have my entire troupe in practice every day and getting ready for the 1959 season, therefore, I would appreciate hearing from you.”

Al wrote back January 19<sup>th</sup>, “Dear Freddie, somehow our previous correspondence has become lost. Please let me know if you are available for Cincinnati and St. Louis. As you know, on both dates I am using two flying acts, so I may use your act and Bill’s act too. Please send photos, especially of the girl in the act, also let me know her age and how she looks. Last year I had a very bad experience with the LaMar act. It is important that you describe the routine of the act.”

Fred responded and Al sent him a contract for St. Louis Police Circus for \$1200 net. Al had put the flying act routines on the second page of the contract and asked Fred to sign and send back. Fred must have asked that the committee to pay Al’s 10% as Al wrote Fred February 11<sup>th</sup>, “The St. Louis Police Circus Acts Committee has refused to accept your contract and absorb the 10%. Therefore, in order to obtain the St. Louis contracts, please sign the enclosed commission slips and return immediately.”

The May 4, 1959 *Billboard* had the article, “Dobritch Names St. Louis Acts. The Arena roof was damaged in a tornado and the new show dates are May 7-17. The performance will feature Chuck Connors and Johnny Crow from the ABC program *The Rifleman*. The Aerial Carousel, a Wallenda number, is flanked by aerialists Jeannine Pivoteau, Elizabeth Nock, Ruth Flannagan and Joanne Day.” (When I was a little performer, we worked with Jeannine and I thought she was such a beautiful performer. Sue Pelto, of the Flying Valentinos, had an autographed photo of Ruth in her collection, which I have now.) “Also in the program were the Rose Gold Trio and Bobo Barnett has the spot between that and the Great Wallenda high wire act. After intermission come the Flying Zacchins and the Flying Valentines and the Jennier’s seals.”<sup>84</sup>

Al wrote Fred to explain that the tornado forced him

to send out new contracts. So, once again, Fred had to send back new contracts. Freddie and his troupe went on to play Des Moines for Al. He got into a little trouble in May. Al wrote him May 27, saying, “The Suburban Park, near Syracuse, is under A.G.V.A. jurisdiction. Since I found out in St. Louis that you are not a member of such, you will have to contact them and try to get special permission to work the park.” Fred sent Al a postcard saying, “After reading over your contracts for the Park and talking to my people, I regret to advise that their decision and mine is to ask for a cancellation owing to the fact there are to be 15 performances in six days, on such small money (\$500 less 10%).”

Over the years I know mom and dad had a lot of publicity photos which appeared in newspapers all over the country. Fred wrote to Al, “Would appreciate if you will be so kind to send back all photos that were sent to your office last winter for St. Louis, Des Moines and Syracuse as I will need them badly for agents wishing to book the troupe for winter dates coming up.” Perhaps Freddie didn’t have the money to spend on photos. Al wrote back July 15 to inform him that he didn’t have any photos. In July, Fred played Seaside Park in Virginia Beach and Ocean View Park in Norfolk and later played the Maryland State Fair. In November, they performed at the Houston Shrine Circus for Orrin Davenport.

Bill started his correspondence to Al for 1959 on January 6 asking if he could book his flying act made up of all new people under the age of 25. “I will not be in the act due to illness, but will manage it and will give you the type of act I have always done.”

Al answered, “Please quote salary for Cincinnati, St. Louis and Des Moines. It is of utmost importance that you send me photos (full figure) of all members of the act, and also describe routines which are sure. I don’t want terrific routines but a smooth running act.”

Al sent Bill the contracts for all three cities and then sent a letter on January 26<sup>th</sup> saying, “Eddie Zacchini tells me that the Ray-Dels act is booked for Tom Packs, so forget Cincinnati. I will be in St. Louis in February and will try to get their contracts signed, but the final decision is with the Circus Acts Committee.”

Bill wrote back, “I do know where the Ray-Dels will be as they are my number one act, and they do not have anything to do with this act that I am booking with you. If I can’t have the Cincinnati date, I can’t play any of them as it would not pay me to come up just for the St. Louis date. I will sign the contracts just in case you see it my way.” Al answered back, “Note that you don’t want St. Louis if you





*To Lorraine and Cherie, Bill's all new Flying LaVals, 1959.*

don't get Cincinnati, so I have destroyed all contracts. I am compelled to hire another act for St. Louis. Quote salary for Canadian National Exhibition, in Toronto August 28-September 7<sup>th</sup>. Matinees only."

In June, Bill wrote to Al asking about the Evansville date in November, saying, "It seems like I quote too much money for a date so why don't you tell me what you can pay and I just might take you up." Al replied, "We never make an offer for salary. You have to quote your lowest for Evansville."

A few days later Bill wrote Al again, "I would like to let you know where all the flying acts will be in November. Ray-Dels will be with Davenport, Malko's will be in Houston and Fort Worth, Harold Voise also has Houston and Fort Worth. Eddie Zacchini will be in New Orleans. I am asking \$650 for the Evansville date net. Will also give you a girl to do web if wanted."

The last letter of the year to Al reminded him that Bill was booking his act for 1960. He wrote, "Will have a damn good flying act and will appreciate any bookings you can give me." The LaVals were in Pittsburgh in July for the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Police Circus at Forbes Field with performers were the Walendas, Famous Nocks, Gee Gee Powell and her huskies, Welde's Bears, Flying Zacchins, the Lacey Troupe, rolling globes, and Pat Anthony with Wallace, the untameable fighting lion.

The LaVals closed the season in New Orleans November 29<sup>th</sup> for the Tom Packs Circus.

For 1959, Lorraine was booking the dates, and I was working the trapeze and perch on the double trapeze rigging. We played all Illinois dates from January through the end of December.

## 1960s

In 1960, Fred wrote Al Dobritch a letter from his home in Houston February 28<sup>th</sup>, "Dear Al, please advise your best price for the Atlanta indoor date. Can give you one girl and three men. Do not worry about the A.G.V.A. set up as I have an understanding with them that we will join on our



opening of the season and pay as we go along until paid up. At the present writing, all of my people are here now having just joined the past week to get in many rehearsals and repairing equipment for the coming season."

Fred's troupe played North Dakota, six weeks in Canada, and the West Texas Fair in Abilene with the Bill Hames Carnival in September. The October 3<sup>rd</sup> *Billboard* printed, "Freddie Valentine postals that the Four Flying Valentines are having a good season, including a good run with Bailey Bros. Circus, now playing 17 weeks of fairs. Fair tour started June 27 in Bottineau, North Dakota and will end at the Heart of Texas Fair in Waco October 15. It included six weeks in Canada."<sup>85</sup>

There was an article in the Waco *Tribune-Herald* October 7<sup>th</sup> which explained why one of the Flying Valentines had his arm bandaged. "Donnie Winters, 26 ... did not injure the arm while on the trapeze. He ripped a gash from the wrist to elbow when he fell from a truck early in the week."<sup>86</sup>

And in the October 6<sup>th</sup> edition of the same paper was the headline, "Former Waitress: Trapeze Star Says Climbing Is Hardest." The article reads:

"Oh, we all fall sometimes, that's way the net is there," said 22 year-old Gail Wilks, the female star of the Flying Valentines. "The blonde, former Pittsburgh waitress was resting in her tiny trailer on the fairgrounds waiting for the next performance.

"There are some off-days when you get up there and nothing feels right, everything goes wrong. We work over a net because we turn loose in mid-air. Those acts where they don't use nets - you just watch them, they don't turn loose of one bar until they have a hold of another one. It is too dangerous, the way we do our act - you've got to have a net. We also carry four people in our act. In case one gets hurt, the act can always go on.

"There is 50-year-old Fred Valentine, 'the Boss,' and 17 year old Herman McDougal, the youngest of the troupe, and Donnie Winters, 26." Gail said, "Fred trained her and the other members of the act in his back yard in the Heights Addition of Houston. Fred has been flying for 31 years. I was working as a waitress when I read a want ad in the paper for someone to train with Valentine. A girl working for Fred wanted to quit and he needed a replacement. I answered the ad, but he couldn't use me until the season ended so he could train me. I had never seen a rig before, much less know how to work on one.



Fred Valentine (in center) with troupe in Hawaii, 1961.

So, he called me a few weeks later and I joined him in Houston and we started training.

"That was five years ago and the smooth outline of hard muscles in the sun-tanned trapeze artist tells the story of hard work on the high-flying swings. I always had big arms, they just weren't as hard as they are now...but look what flying does to your legs. You see, all you do with your arm is support yourself, but you have to kick to gain momentum with your legs. It's also a big strain on your back because of all the twisting and kicking.

"During the winter lay-off in Houston, Gail works as a car-hop at a drive-in for a while. During those winter months, I usually go up to 140 pounds while practicing. For some reason I lose about 20 pounds when we start performing. I would never do anything else - you never get too old to perform. As long as you can climb to the pedestal board, you





Benny Gibson and George Valentine.

can perform. The climbing is the hardest part.”<sup>87</sup>

Bill received a letter written January 28, 1960 from Al Dobritch. He wrote, “Send photos of the act-with the personnel now appearing in the act, and advise me the names of those participating. Quote lowest possible salary for St. Louis.” He also sent Bill contracts for the Shrine Circus in Atlanta in April on February 19<sup>th</sup>.

Bill sent Al a letter, explaining things:

“I am not good at explaining so I hope you understand my letter. Two weeks ago my girl fell out of the net and fractured her head. At the time, the doctor said she would be ready to work again by April first, so I waited and now he said that she had better stay away from a flying act as another fall on the head would kill her, so that was the end of her.

“I contacted Joanne Day to play the date for me, but Mr. Davenport will not let her out of working Columbus, so that we could get in some practice to

work Atlanta. She closes April 9<sup>th</sup> but that still would not give me enough time, and I sure as hell don’t want to come in with a lousy act. So, please forgive me, but I do have to ask for a cancellation of my contract to play Atlanta as it will be impossible for me to play it.

“I have a girl coming in next month from California and should have my act ready by June and if you want to use me after turning down two contracts, will appreciate hearing from you.”

He also included a note from the Yale Hospital in Houston dated March 30, 1960 which supported all the details about the girl named Jackie Marie Gibson.

In July, Bill’s act was in Canada, Missouri and in November played New Orleans. In August Al had sent a letter to Bill to send quotes for salary for Jersey City, Toledo and Evansville. That is the end of their correspondence from the Milner Library files.

In 1960, Lorraine booked my trapeze act into Illinois and Indiana towns, while booking other acts for other events in Illinois. We went to the Piatt County Fair, the Daviess County Fair in Elnora, Indiana, and Lawrence County Fair in Bridgeport, Illinois and closed the year in Peoria for the Shrine Circus at the Consistory.

Fred was in Hawaii with a circus in 1961 because I have a great dated color photo of him with a lady and man in costume. I could find no other information in the *Billboard* for that year.

September 10, 1962 The Four Flying Valentines (three male aerialists, one was a clown, plus a lady) performed in Abilene, Texas as the free act for the West Texas Fair.<sup>88</sup>

The first week of May 1963, the act performed in Corpus Christi for Buccaneer Days. There was a photo in *The Corpus Christi Caller-Times* May 8<sup>th</sup> with Bennie Gibson, Tony Knaus, 21, clown, Gail Wilks, 25, and Fred, 53. They performed at 7:30 and 9:30 P.M. during the week, and 2, 5 and 7 P.M. on the weekend. There was also a nice article about their catcher, Bennie Gibson.

“The oldest catcher now working in a trapeze act in the United States, Bennie Gibson of House said this country’s daring young men are not getting on the flying trapeze anymore.

“It’s hard to find anybody that really wants to learn anymore,” said the 55-year-old half-Choctaw Indian. “It takes about seven years for a catcher to learn timing. No two aerial maneuvers take the same swing in the air.” Gibson explained that this perfect timing between the leaper somersaulting





*Cherie, George and the net! I will cherish and share the enthusiasm seen here as long as I'm able!*

through the air and the catcher waiting on a swinging bar to grab him is the essence of the successful act. Gibson was born in Oneida, Tennessee. (His father was of the Oneida Indiana tribe and his mother was Welsh). He learned trapeze work as a boy in Bloomington, Illinois, where many circus performers had permanent homes.

"There he grew up with Fred Valentine, now 53, the principal leaper with the act here, and the two have worked together periodically for the past 33 years. The other two members of the quartet here, which give free performances in the Memorial Coliseum area, are Gail Wilks, 25, the girl leaper, and Tony Knaus, 21, the clown.

"The group performs about 30 weeks of the

year and then they return home and usually take up more ordinary jobs the rest of the year. Bennie runs a nickel-plating business. Gail is from Florida, and Tony is from Houston. Bennie recalls, that the good Lord doesn't give you all the chances in the world. As an illustration, he remembered a time in Japan when he was supposed to catch Fred, but a bee hit him between the eyes, temporarily blinding him and causing him to miss the catch.

"He also pointed out that the recent high winds on the Bayfront are causing many missed catches here. He said we haven't given but one complete show since we've been here. Tony the clown in the act became a flyer strictly by accident. A carpenter, he went to California looking for work three years ago. Having no luck, he was hitch-hiking home when a catcher with a trapeze act picked him up in Tucson. He made his debut a few days later in Phoenix. Bennie said, but if I had to do it over again, I guess I'd do the same thing. It gets in your blood."<sup>89</sup>

I believe Freddie retired around 1964 after over 30 years of performing. He died July 15, 1969. Bill, retired around 1958 and passed away October 25, 1970. Roy, the youngest of the brothers, died May 2, 1985. All are buried in Woodlawn Cemetery in Houston next to their parents.

Lorraine sold George's Circus Haven in 1962 to Illinois State University to be used for storage. We lived there as caretakers until 1966. I kept performing around Illinois with the "little rigging" until Memorial Day weekend 1964, performing then at Glen Oak Park in Peoria, Illinois.

Lorraine Bernice Mather Valentine passed away January 10, 1987 after many years of performing and entertaining thousands across the country. She is buried in Park Hill Cemetery in Bloomington, next to her parents. George is across the street in the American Legion Military Section.

Sue Peltó, who had performed with the Flying Valentinos since 1935, died August 25, 1995 in Florida. The Flying Valentinos legacy went with her.

The Valentine brothers really had exciting lives. I'm sure their parents would have been very proud of them. And Bloomington won't forget them either – I will make sure of that with every presentation I make to the public. With photos, journals, costumes, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks and memories of family, friends, and even strangers, the Flying Valentinos, the Flying LaVals, the Flying Valentines and the Flying Romas will never be forgotten. And to think, they all started their flying act careers right here in Bloomington, Illinois! **BW**



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86. *Waco News-Tribune*, "Trapeze Artist Uses HOT..." October 7, 1960, p. 10
87. *Waco News-Tribune*, "Former Waitress: Trapeze Star..." October 6, 1960, p. 16
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89. *The Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, "Trapeze Needs More Daring Young Men Says Catcher," May 8, 1963, p. 14



# *The Greatest Little Show on Earth*

## *The YMCA Circus of Bloomington, Illinois*

### *Part 2*

*by Steve Gossard*



Bloomington, Illinois YMCA building constructed c. 1907. Author's collection

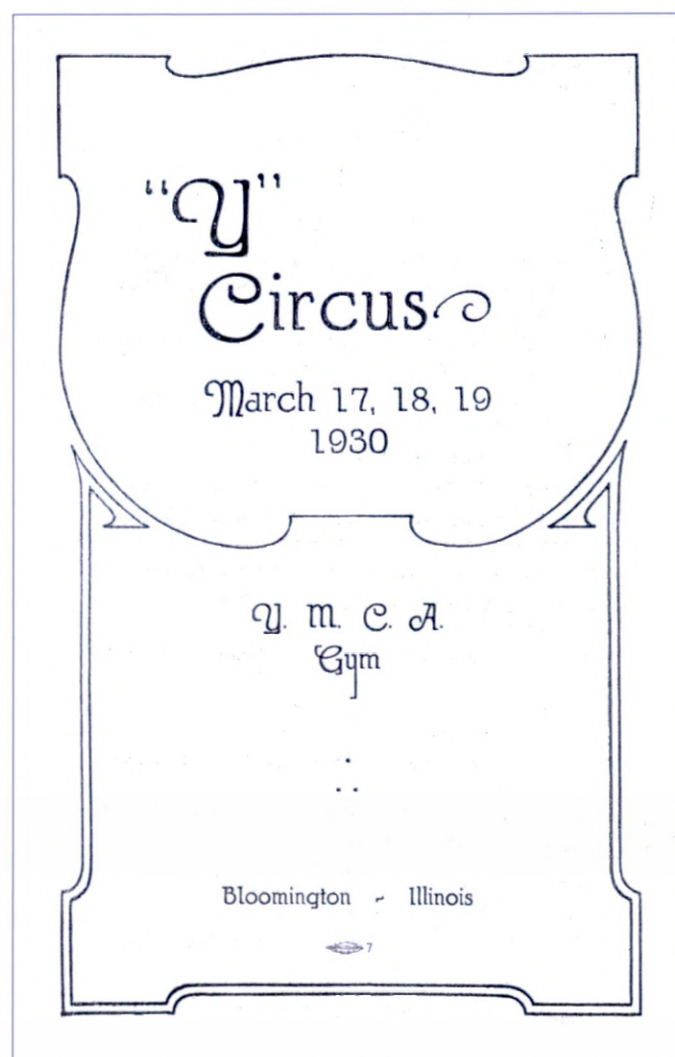
1930

Ads appeared in the *Pantagraph* March 12, 14, 16, and 18, 1930 publicizing a two hour program with 12 different professional troupes (or members thereof) performing in a program of 18 acts for the YMCA Circus to be presented March 17-19 at 8:15 P.M. There was no mention of a matinee performance. Prices were \$.50, \$.75 and \$1 with children's tickets \$.25 less.

The show opened with a dance spectacle by 32 Illinois State Normal University girls. Later on a group of 16 YMCA boys appeared in a garland entree. One of the amateur girls gave a demonstration of posing, followed by 18 girls from the Illinois Soldiers' and Sailors' Home with a tumbling act. The article stated that 17 young men from ISNU "also were featured performers" but did not tell what kind of act they were presenting.<sup>1</sup> This was probably one of Clifford Horton's Gamma Phi fraternity troupes.

The advance ads announced that the program would include professionals from the Flying Herberts, the Flying Concellos, the Flying LaVans, the Aerial Patts, The Charles Fisher Troupe, the Flying Thrillers, Frank Shepherd, Eldred Sleeter and Gene Enos.

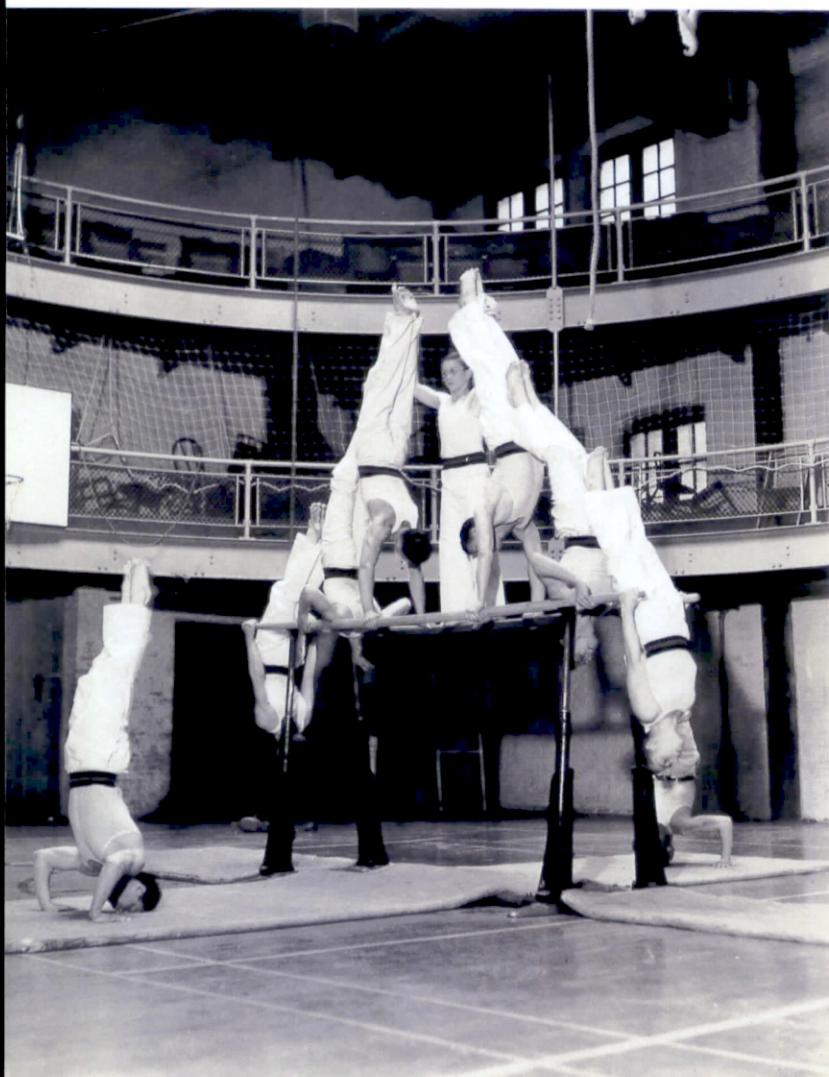
The Flying Thrillers; Voise, Doss and Brooks presented a bar act called the "Three Bar Brothers." The Thrillers performed with the Sells Floto Circus from 1929 through 1931. Antoinette Concello was also featured in the 1930 program doing cloud swings early in the program.



YMCA Circus program cover, 1930.

Author's collection





*Gamma Phi Circus acrobats pyramid building, c. 1935.*

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## 1931

Ads for the 1931 "Y" circus appeared in the *Pantagraph* during the week of March 24 billing a program of 19 acts for three nights, the 23<sup>rd</sup> through the 25<sup>th</sup>, at 8:15 P.M. with a matinee the 25<sup>th</sup> at 2:30.

Fairly detailed programs were published March 22 and 24 and listed the major troupes to which the professional performers belonged. The troupes listed were the Concellos, the LaMars, the Fishers, the Flying Wards, the Flying Sullivans, the Flying LaVans, and Agnes Doss was listed separately. The March 22 article called it the YMCA-YWCA Circus. Al Jones substituted for Jake Ward as ringmaster and the music was provided by the community band under the direction of George Marton. As always, vendors passed among the crowd with popcorn, peanuts, and soft drinks.

## The Program

Opening Spectacle

Exhibition by YWCA Girls and  
Members of the Ward Troupe

Pony Drill – YMCA Boys

Swinging Ladders

Mickey, Mitzie and Genevieve Ward

Parallel Bars – ISNU

Clog Dance – Y.W.C.A. Group

Comedy Tumbling Act – Razelli Bros.: Clifford  
Horton, Art Concello and Harold Ward (March 24  
article substituted Billy Ward for Clifford Horton)

Ward's Bucking Mule

Indian Club Number

Clifford Horton and Frank Muhl

Dance and Tumbling Number – Helen Marvel

Iron Jaw Display – Three Ward Girls

Roman Pyramid Building – ISNU Athletes

Horizontal Bars – Tom Kitchen Trio

Waltz Clog Dance – Two YWCA Girls

Single Trapeze – Agnes Doss

Tumbling – ISNU

Flying Return Act – LaMars and Fishers combined

The entire cast participated in the opening spectacle. This generally consisted of a promenade of performers in costume, with smiling faces, down the sides of the gym to exit once again. Mickey and Mitzie Ward on swinging ladders were actually Mickey King and Mitzie Sleeter (Mitzie Moore), wife of Red Sleeter. Mitzie Moore and her sister, Gracie, were daughters of Dinty Moore, originally from Georgia, more recently from Peru, Indiana. They had grown up in their little family circus working as acrobats and all-round circus performers (their sister, Eva, married the famous clown, Emmet Kelly and they performed a double trapeze act as the "Aerial Kellys" for several years before he went into clowning). Mitzie and Gracie had joined the Ward troupe in 1928. Genevieve Ward, youngest child of Eddie and Mayme, was just 10 years old. She performed solo on single trapeze and web. It was said that some of the property men took hard tumbles trying to ride Elzie Ward's





*Mayme Ward's Flying Wards; Mitzie Moore, Elaine Sullivan, Frank Shepherd, Mayme Ward, Wayne Larey, unidentified girl flyer, Harold Genders, Agnes Marine, Gracie Moore, c. 1930.*

Arthur Brown collection

bucking mule. Helen Marvel, who presented the dance and tumbling number, was described as a "toe dancer" from Dwight, Illinois.

Tom Kitchen hadn't worked with the LaVans since the early 1900s. His exact activities are uncertain, but it was mentioned in a 1933 *Billboard* article that he had done a "crackerjack" bicycle act in the early 1900s also. It is a fair guess that he had worked with various troupes over the years. A photograph in Clyde Noble's scrapbook pictures Kitchen in clown face. Walt Graybeal met Tom in the 1930s. He recalled Tom as being a very short fellow who walked with a limp due to injuries he had suffered in a fall when he was younger. In the 1930s Tom was working out of Chicago with a bar act and a flying act made up of three or four young performers whom he had trained. He brought this act to the YMCA Circus in 1931.

The climax of Agnes Doss' single trapeze act was described as follows: "She concludes the act by passing her arms over the bar at her back, locking her fingers in front of her body and rolling completely around the bar time

and time again." This is what is known in the profession as "muscle grinds" in the circus profession. It was said that she would present this act with the Sells Floto Circus in the summer. C. D. Curtis once again worked as catcher for the flying act, which was made up of people from the LaMar Troupe and the Fishers.<sup>2</sup>

## 1932

Besides the advertisements which normally accompanied the "Y" Circus, the *Pantagraph* also featured several photographs of the outstanding professionals to be included in the program for 1932. On March 11 the *Pantagraph* published a photo of Bert Doss and Harold Voise performing a forward-over passing leap with the Flying Thrillers at the Chicago Coliseum, and

stated that they would be back again to perform at the "Y" Circus. On March 15 an illustration of Art and Antoinette Concello was published with the caption stating that Antoinette would be doing a ring and web act, and Art would do a high aerial bar act. A photo of the Flying LaMars was published March 17, and on the 18<sup>th</sup> a photo of the bar act rigging at the "Y" gym appeared.

The "Y" Circus was to be presented March 17-19 at 8:15 P.M. at \$.50 and \$.75 with a Saturday matinee the 19<sup>th</sup> at 2:15 P.M. for \$.25 per person. Lloyd Eyer served as "Question director," and Jake Ward was the ringmaster. For the first time it was stated that C. D. Curtis was in charge of the circus organization and Lloyd Eyer assisted in staging the acts. The YMCA Circus had been Eyer's conception since the first performance in 1910. He had seen some of the foremost professionals in the business come and go. Now Eyer was turning control of the "Y" Circus over to his protégé, Clarence D. Curtis. It was Curtis who had first introduced Art Concello, Tuffy Genders, Wayne Larey, Eldon Day and so many others to circus work.



### The Program

Concert - Bloomington Band, George Marton, dir.

Opening Spec - Adelaide Bach Dance Troupe

Aerial Bars

Charles Fisher, Art Concello and Harold Voise

Tumbling - ISNU Students

Whirl - Leona Bell

Tap Dance - Jim and Ted Ellis

Cloud Swing - Nellie Sullivan

Acrobatic Dance - Ruth Farnham

Parallel Bar Pyramids - ISNU Students

Aerial Display

Connie Fisher, Irma Ulrich, Antoinette Concello

Tumbling - YMCA Boys

Revolving Ladders - Russell Carter, Carl Unsicker

Iron Jaw - Evelyn Fleming, Neva Marine

Comedy Tumbling - Nate Leon, Billy Ward, C. E. Horton

Flying Act - Harry LaMar, Ray Hendryx, Evelyn Fleming,  
Betty Phillips and Henry Robbins

Clowns - Billy Ward, C. E. Horton, Ray Hendryx, O. E.  
Dops, Nate Leon and Walter Graybeal<sup>3</sup>

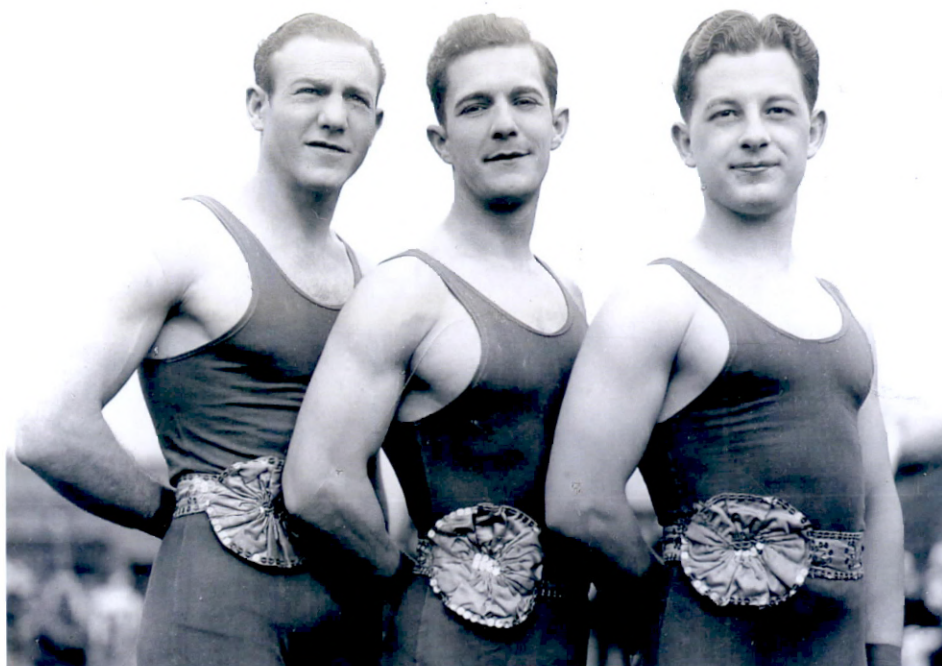
Harry LaVan served as one of the doormen. Among the prop men were Carl Durbin, Roy Deisler and Joe Killian. Durbin was a catcher for one of Art Concello's troupes. He and his wife, Dorothy, performed with Concello's flyers on the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus for many years. Roy Deisler (later along with his wife, Juanita) worked for years with Harold Voise's flying act. They later formed their own troupe, the Flying Deislars. Joe Killian was Art Concello's step-brother, and he also later worked as one of the catchers with one of Art's flying acts.

No doubt encouraged by his participation with the YMCA Circus, Clifford Horton began presenting an annual Gamma Phi Circus at Illi-

nois State Normal University. 1932 marked the first annual Gamma Phi Circus presentation independent of the YMCA Circus of Bloomington. In the early days Gamma Phi was a men's gymnastic fraternity, but eventually it would evolve into an all-round circus training organization. Some colleges and universities included circus presentations during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but as time went by the advent of organized gymnastic sports overshadowed the circus presentations, and most collegiate circuses died out. Not so the Gamma Phi Circus of ISNU, which maintained a strong influence from the YMCA Circus professionals of Bloomington. "It began years ago as a tumbling exhibition," the *Pantagraph* reported years later "and has developed almost into a three ring big top hit."<sup>4</sup> The Gamma Phi Circus of Illinois State University is now the oldest collegiate circus in America, presenting circus shows of the highest quality in April of each year.

### 1933

Advertisements for the 1933 "Y" Circus billed a two hour 20 act program, this time running for four days from March 22-25. A *Pantagraph* article March 23 stated, however, that "of the 15 acts offered, nine were professional."<sup>5</sup> Once again the performances were to be at 8:15 P.M. with an additional matinee Sunday afternoon. The performance was to include 180 participants.



*The Flying Thrillers; Bob Brooks, Burt Doss, Harold Voise, c. 1930.*

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## The Program<sup>6</sup>

Band Concert

Swinging Ladders

Connie Fisher, Mary Jane Jones and Charlotte Tapp

Butterflies

Leaping Line – Eldon Day, Harold Genders, Charles Holloway, Robert Brown, Babe Laidley, Bob Porter, Bill Carry and Walter Graybeal

Big Rings – Bakalar Brothers

Ladder Pyramids

Chair Balancing – Frank Zerado

Miss Bach's Dancing Groups – Tap Number and Ponies

Heel Catch (single trapeze) – Ray LaRay

Electric Wands and Indian Clubs – ISNU Men

Iron Jaw – Evelyn Simpson and Madeline Day

Ali Ben Hassen Tumblers

Eldred Sleeter, Zerado Jr., Eldon Day, Junior Wells, Virgil Gaffney, Bob Porter and Babe Laidley

Whitmer's Dance Groups – Military Tap and Adagio

Little Aerial Number

Agnes Doss, Leona Bell and Marcie Genders

Cannon Act – Bakalar Brothers

Flying Act – Bennie Gibson, Mrs. Charles Fisher, Connie Fisher and Charles Fisher

The *Pantagraph* article of the 23<sup>rd</sup> gave brief descriptions of the acts presented. Once again Jake Ward was to be ringmaster and Lloyd Eyer served as equestrian director. The ISNU gymnastic team performed an act which “consisted of swinging electrically lighted Indian clubs in a darkened auditorium, the moving lights creating curious curves of color in the darkness.” The young men of the YMCA presented the ladder pyramids.

The Bakalar Brothers, one of the imported professional acts (from Streator, Illinois) presented a “big rings act” in the middle of the program “stunting on two revolving iron loops.” The cannon act which they presented later in the program was said to be “the latest in circus farces, and was greeted with rounds of laughter and applause.” Meanwhile Frank Zerado's single trapeze act featured a chair balancing stunt which “was the kind that makes the crowd hold its breath.” Another single trapeze act by Ray LaRay (which



Adlaide Bach, c. 1935.

Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections

might have been Ray Hendryx) featured a heel catch which was diagramed nicely in the paper.<sup>7</sup>

The article stated that Agnes Doss had “whirled 70 times around the trapeze bar with a single hand hold”<sup>8</sup> (certainly an unconventional type of solo act). The flying act featured a two-and-a-half somersault to a hand catch.

## 1934

The *Sunday Pantagraph* of March 18, 1934 featured a photograph of the Flying Flemings with a statement that this troupe would be one of the features of the YMCA Circus that year. The members of the troupe were identified as Billy Ward, Alicia Cornwall, Herb Fleming, Rose Fleming and Wayne Larey. On the same page the *Pantagraph* paid a rare nostalgic tribute to Harry “Pops” LaVan, calling him the “Dean of Aerialists” and crediting him with training many of the performers with the show.

The 1934 “Y” circus received much more attention in the pages of the *Pantagraph* than ever before. On March





*The Adelaide Bach dancers, c. 1935.*

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16 a photograph featured 10 girls from the Adelaide Bach Dance Studio which were to take part in a "spectacular ladders act" with the show. The next day an article appeared which recapped the career of Eldred, "Red" Sleeter along with his photograph, and remarked on his participation in the program of the "Y" Circus.<sup>9</sup> March 18, a photograph of Mitzie Moore (Sleeter) appeared. A group of five Normal grade school girls were pictured in the March 20 *Pantagraph* stating that this group of tumblers had been coached by Clifford Horton and would be appearing in the "Y" program. The following day a photo of three performers on the tight wire appeared, with parasols in hand.

Ads appeared March 18, 21, 22, and 23 advertising a two hour 20 act circus to be presented for four days March 21-24 at 8:15 P.M. with a 2:15 matinee Saturday the 24<sup>th</sup>. Admission was set at \$.25 for children and \$.50 for adults.

On Saturday the 17<sup>th</sup> Harry LaVan and Bernard Smith climbed to the balcony of the courthouse at 11:30 A.M. and again at 1:30 P.M., and they released 25 balloons each time, carrying free tickets for the "Y" Circus. "There was a mad scramble among small children below as half a dozen descended...some floated out to Normal and other residence districts...and some were expected to carry to distant points."<sup>10</sup>

### **The Program<sup>11</sup>**

- Tournament – Everyone
- High Bars
- Garland Entree – 17 Boys
- Illinois Soldiers and Sailors Children School Number 17 Boys
- Little Aerial Number
- Pony Dance – 18 Girls
- Swinging Ladders – 10 Girls
- Wire Act
- Limber Backs – Five Girls
- Iron Jaw
- Patches – 13 Girls
- Arab Tumblers
- Parallel Bars
- Cloud Swing
- Pyramids – 17 ISNU Boys
- Flying Act





*Flying Flemings; Rose Fleming, Lester Thomas, Bess Shepherd, Frank Shepherd, Evelyn Simpson, Herb Fleming, c. 1935.*

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In total, 136 performers participated in the 1934 presentation of the "Y" Circus.<sup>12</sup> After the opening tournament Charles Fisher, Bert Doss, and Tom Kerrick "climbed upon the net and to the trapeze suspended from the ceiling for a comedy and serious act combined." Since this act was described as a "high bar act", it is safe to assume that the trapeze rigging and the stationary bar rigging were somehow interchangeable. The YMCA boys in the garland entree were "each carrying a red, white and blue garland, which they used to make various formations." The swinging ladders display was made up of 10 girls from the Adelaide Bach dance studio coached by Gracie Genders "in colorful costumes." In this act the girls were described as assuming "in unison a series of difficult positions as the 10 section ladder swung to and fro."

The wire walking display was a favorite feature of the show that year. In the center of the gym Red Sleeter performed a slack wire number and at either end were tight wire acts. Two teams of three persons each did the tight wire work. One part in the act consisted of "dancing, jumping, posing and other feats," and in the other part "two of

the boys jumped obstructions two feet wide." The stunts in this three-part act must have been synchronized for maximum effect. It was said that Sleeter, working the middle slack wire alone, "slithered back and forth in a sort of dance on the slack wire giving directions to the others. As the act closed he swung himself from side to side on the loosely strung wire."

The "Arab Tumblers" act included a teeterboard routine with Red Sleeter and Vincent Wells, and featured Wells in a double somersault into "a net held by half a dozen assistants." Red's wife, Mitzie, was also participating in a cloud swing in which "she flung herself forward to hang by her hands and her feet from the swinging rope on which she had been seated." The "brightly costumed Little Aerial Number" was described as a trapeze act of some sort. The iron jaw routine finished with a "slide for life from high on the south end of the room to the north end, hanging by her teeth to a rope looped over a taught wire."

Of the ISNU students in the pyramid building display, it was said that they "exhibited prowess," wearing green and red shirts. The clown acts included a comedy boxing number, and an act in which a clown "drank five gallons of a



beverage.”

Some other amateur acts mentioned in the *Pantagraph* included the parallel bars act, Illinois Soldiers and Sailors’ Children’s School Tumblers, the Adelaide Bach dance students’ “pony” dance number, the “limber backs” group of five small girls coached by Clifford Horton, and a dance act called “patches.”

The finale of the program was the Flying Flemings’ 10 minute flying return act, Herb Fleming catching, with Wayne Larey and Billy Ward flying. The *Pantagraph* described their forward over passing leap in detail.

### 1935

The “Y” Circus in 1935 was presented over four days from Tuesday March 26 through Friday the 29<sup>th</sup>. The performances were to take place at 8:15 P.M. with a Friday matinee at 2:15 P.M. as in years before. Seats were reserved at \$.25, \$.50 and \$.75, and matinee prices were set at \$.25 for children and \$.50 for adults. This same year the fourth annual ISNU Gamma Phi Circus was running advertisements for performances on Thursday and Friday March 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> at McCormick Gymnasium for \$.25 general admission. For this year’s YMCA Circus matinee performance over 100 children were awarded tickets for scholastic achievement.

On March 23 the *Pantagraph* ran a photograph of Frank Shepherd falling into an ankle drop on the single trapeze as a feature of the “Y” Circus and on March 22 a photo and article featured Herberta Beeson, a tight wire walker who would be performing also.

#### The Program<sup>13</sup>

Tournament – All performers

Casting Act

Rhythm Steppers

Swinging Ladders – Five Girls



*Frank Shepherd having dismounted from the single trapeze with a somersault to the web at the YMCA Circus.*

Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections

#### Hand Balancing and Tumbling

Birth of the Butterfly

Parallel Bar Pyramids

Clown Band

High Parallel Bars

Happy Steppers – 13 Girls

Single Trapeze – Frank Shepherd

Cloud Swing

Tight Wire – Herberta Beeson

Revolving Ladders

Ali Ben Hassen Tumblers

Flying Act

We are fortunate to have parts of several YMCA Circuses recorded on 8mm film in the Circus & Allied Arts Collections as part of the estate of the late Harold Ramage,



circus enthusiast and collector, of Bloomington. The films are in the process of being transferred to digital format, and are still a superb record of much of the YMCA Circus presentations. One film of the 1935 YMCA Circus includes the opening spectacle, a walk-around in the gym by the entire cast; part of the casting act; the Adelaide Bach Rhythm Steppers dance unit; swinging ladders, tumblers from the Illinois Soldiers and Sailors Home orphanage; Agnes Doss iron jaw butterfly, Spanish web and muscle grinds act; Frank Shepherd's single trapeze act; Herberta Beeson's tight wire act; and the flying return act.

The show lasted two-and-a-half hours, said to be "the best offered by the Y for the last several years."<sup>14</sup> New acts included Herberta Beeson's wire act and Frank Shepherd's single trapeze routine. Gene Enos served as ringmaster and Lloyd Eyer was equestrian director. Clowns included Billy Ward, Bert Doss, and Robert (Bones) Brown. The music was provided by the Bloomington Community Band.

The casting act which opened the program included "Hank," (Henry) Robbins, and "Dude," DuBois Rhodus, all of whom were, or would become professional trapeze artists. The Ramage film offers a unique though brief glimpse at how such acts were presented.

The "Rhythm Steppers" were 19 girls from the Adelaide Bach Dance Studio doing a tap dance number. The swinging ladders display featured five "comely young girls forming a lovely tableaux on circling swinging ladders." While three members of the Iowa State University Gymnastics Team gave an exhibition of hand balancing, 14 boys from the Illinois Soldiers and Sailors' School put on an exhibition of tumbling in which "snap and precision was a keynote," and they "didn't make a bobble."

In the iron jaw butterfly routine, Agnes Doss was accompanied by nine "little dancing pupils in butterfly costumes." Next, 13 YMCA boys "exhibited agility and ability building pyramids." This was followed by the traditional concert by the clown band. The clown band was under the direction of Bert Doss, and included the well-known circus fan and collector, Harold Ramage, in its 10 members. His participation here explains the absence of parts of the program on film. Then, "Mister Lynes took to the parallel bars himself, in company with Lewis Probasco." This was a high bar performance in which the bars were suspended from the ceiling. "The act is said to be something entirely new to the show world," the *Pantagraph* stated on March 25, "and theater and circus scouts have arranged to view it." The "Happy Steppers" were 13 young girls from a local dance studio.

A brief part of Frank Shepherd's single trapeze routine has been preserved on film. This act deserved the extensive coverage it received from the *Pantagraph* that year. Frank was called "America's premier single trapeze artist, one of only four or five persons in the world who do heel and toe catches." Shepherd was unique, it was said, in that he worked without a net under the big top.

"Others in vaudeville do such acts without nets...but he is the only one to perform such an act in a circus...40 feet above the ground....He will be as high as the ceiling will permit in the Y circus."

The *Pantagraph* described his act just as it was recorded on Ramage's film.

"Swinging high, he suddenly lunges off the crossbar apparently into mid air, then catches himself by the heels against the crossbar. Again, he seems to fall off his perch, catches himself by one leg hooked over the bar. In the same manner, he lunges into a toe catch. When the act is finished he lunges into a (half) somersault to a taught, perpendicular rope or web eight feet away, slides down the rope to the floor."

Besides his single trap act, Frank Shepherd also performed in the flying act along with Harry LaMar, Nellie Sullivan, and Agnes Doss. This was obviously not the entire cast of the flying act, however, because the catcher with the act was not named. C. D. Curtis may have filled in as catcher with the act once again.

The revolving ladder display was performed by two ISNU students. The Ali Ben Hassen Tumblers were Red Sleeter, Hank Robbins, Billy Ward, Vincent Wells, Clement Fuller and the Iowa State University tumblers.

## 1936

1936 was a hallmark year for the YMCA Circus, the Bloomington performers paying tribute to the art of trapeze with the largest flying return act in history. The *Pantagraph* reported March 22 that the circus would be extended to a full week of performances, with 11 of 15 acts consisting entirely of professional talent. The program ran as follows:<sup>15</sup>

Concert-YMCA band, A. V. Mansky, director

Grand Entry

Gypsy Spec. - Girls from the Adelaide Bach Dance Studio

Triple High Bars

Hand Balancing and Parallel Bars

Iron Jaw





# Y. M. C. A. CIRCUS

**Bloomington, Illinois**

ONE WEEK

**March 23-28, 1936**

THE WORLD'S BIGGEST LITTLE CIRCUS!

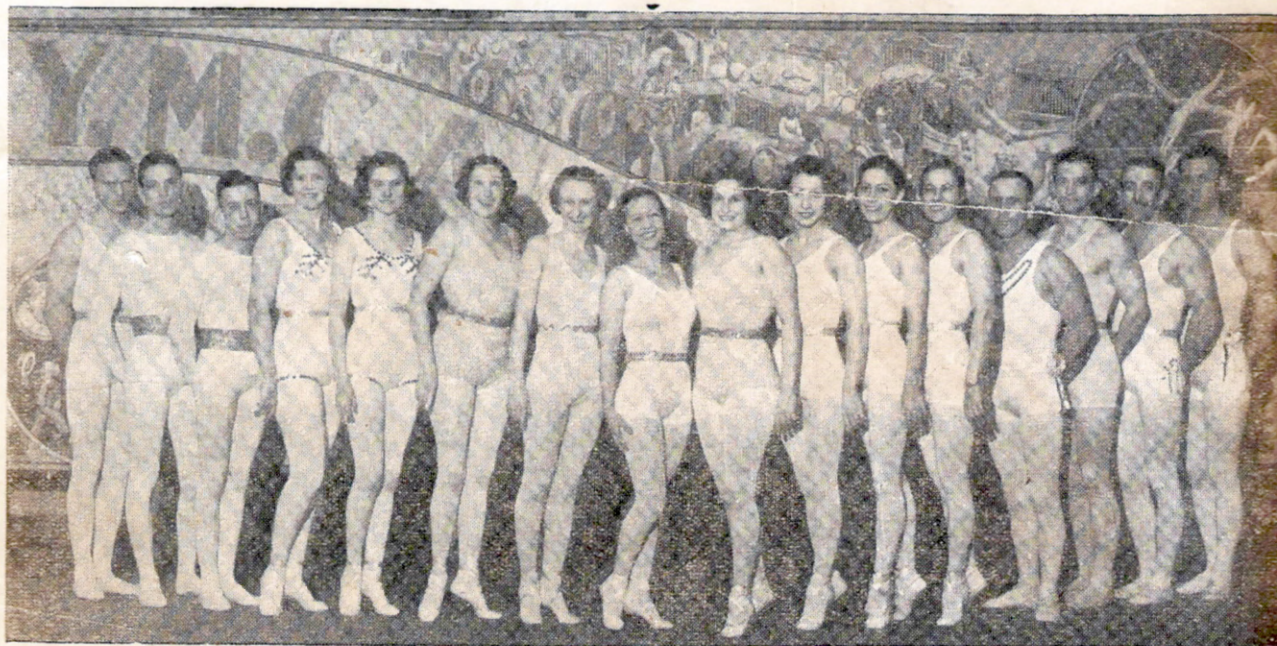
*Dedicated to the Professional Aerialists  
making their home in Bloomington.*

Do you know that Bloomington is the hub of 18 different Flying acts or more than the rest of the world combined?

The Y.M.C.A. Circus is noted and known throughout the world in professional circles. Performers for your entertainment come here from every large circus on the globe. Thanks to our Bloomington Flying Aerialists.

THE WORLD'S BEST WILL BE IN FLYING FORM  
AT THE "Y" CIRCUS

**Largest 'Flying' Act in History to Perform at Indoor Circus**



Members of the act are, left to right,

EDDIE WARD, WALTER GRAYBEAL, ERWIN CROUCHER, FRANCES FISHER, MAXINE FISHER, EDITH FISHER, EVELYN SIMPSON, GRAYCE GENDERS, CONNIE FISHER, ANTOINETTE CONCELLO, LAVON BONHOUSER, MARIAN BORDNER, HARRY LAMAR, BOB PORTER, WAYNE LARRY, and FRANCIS REINER

## 7 Performances—Peanuts—Clowns—All at the "Y" Circus

Never before has the world seen such a group of Flying performers banded together in one great act as will be seen by Bloomington and central Illinois people attending the greatest little Circus.

Scores of other performers from the four corners of the world will be here as one great big family of great circus entertainers.

From the "Y" Circus they branch out in every direction as the great show to the American public must go on.

Here's a real opportunity to see the greatest in the circus business do their stuff before leaving for their respective big circuits. Bring your friends—enjoy the best of circus entertainment—pay your respects to the Flying Circus Profession for only 25, 50, and 75c.

Starts Monday and every nite including Saturday, with a special Matinee Saturday for the children. Make Reservations Now at W. B. Read and Co., Prices 25c—50c—75c.



Ladder Pyramids – YMCA Juniors  
 Web, Contortion Rings and Muscle Grinds  
 Adagio Quartet  
 Casting Act  
 Rhythm Steppers – Adelaide Bach Students  
 Quintuplet Trapeze  
 Arab Tumbling and Teeterboard  
 High Wire Act  
 Walking Pyramids – Older YMCA Boys  
 Flying Return Act

Ten of the 11 professional acts consisted of the triple high bars, the hand balancing and parallel bars, the iron jaw act, the solo aerial act by Ullaine Malloy, the adagio dance, the casting act, the quintuplet trapeze, tumbling and teeterboard, the high wire act of the Billetti troupe and the

flying return act. The 11<sup>th</sup> act in question may have been the YMCA band concert. Ullaine Malloy returned once again performing her beautiful solo routines on web, trapeze, and rings.

## 1937

The “Y” Circus of 1937 was touted to be the best YMCA Circus ever presented. *Pantagraph* reporter Milton Blumke reported March 30 that “The show is a breath taking spectacle of color, music, thrills, spills and high class performances that the circus big top cannot begin to match in 10 times the space,” and “peanuts and crackerjack were munched in extraordinary quantities.”<sup>16</sup> Gus Mansky’s “Y”

*The YMCA flying act of 1936; Charles Waller, Rose Fleming, Elmo Rankin, Connie Fisher, Walter Graybeal, Edith Waller, Oscar Foin, Francis Musselman, Bob Musselman, Maxine Musselman, Herb Fleming, Gracie Genders, Harry LaMar, Mitzie Sleeter and Irwin Croutcher.*

Author’s collection







Above, the flying act in action at the YMCA Circus, 1936.

Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections

Circus orchestra provided the music, and Gene Enos once again served as ringmaster. The circus played for a week featuring 18 acts (though *White Tops* reported in their April-May issue that there were 16 acts).

The opening act was a Russian dance performed by 24 girls. "Each was costumed in bright Cossack (indecipherable word), flaring skirts and kerchief headpieces." Jesse Parsons, Lewis Probasco and Willie Krause performed in the high parallel bar act, with Probasco and Krause doing comedy.

The *Pantagraph* reported that the older boys' class at the "Y" would also exhibit a parallel bar pyramid act under the direction of Warren Lynes, physical director at the YMCA. This act was to give five different formations, including a human headstand pyramid which reached into the rafters. An act called "Phil and Doty & Co.," a "new professional act" according to *White Tops*, followed with a head and hand balancing act. Next another amateur act took the floor dancing in clown costumes. This act was called the "Tiny Tots," and consisted of 24 little girls and boys. "Their tall dunce caps and paper snowball fight all but captured first place in humor and rhythm," the *White Tops* reported.

The clown act was headed by Harold Genders. The

*Pantagraph* described this act April 2<sup>nd</sup> as a parody of a May pole dance, and it was later stated that even the most sophisticated spectator "finally broke into spasms of laughter."<sup>17</sup>

Gracie Genders presented a troupe of young girls on swinging ladders and web, after which one of the little girls presented Gracie with a bouquet of flowers in honor of her birthday. A troupe from the Pontiac youth circus, calling themselves "The Imperial Four" gave a performance. This was an acrobatic and adagio act. This act was called "one of the best thrillers of the night." Next Eddie Ward Jr., Gracie Genders, Bob Porter and Marion Bordner presented a simultaneous display of double trapeze and swinging perch. The *Pantagraph* reporter added a reminder that these acts used no net. During intermission Harold Helman performed as a one-man band with his little daughter accompanying him with a baton twirling exhibition. Helen Billetti Warburton recalled Harold's act 60 years later. "He had things on his head, arms, feet, elbows, knees, his head and everywhere," Helen recalled, "and even something around his neck for a harmonica...and a trumpet." At the same time, the clowns were performing another skit, and the "Rhythm Rollers," a polished amateur roller skating act was also performing.





*The Phil and Doty head-balancing act, YMCA Circus, 1937.*

Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections

The Billetti wire act returned to the "Y" Circus that year. In addition to their exceptional tricks of the previous year, Joe Shalasky crossed the wire on a unicycle with Helen on his shoulders. The revolving trapeze act followed, consisting of Marion Bordner, Gracie Genders, LaVon Bornhauser and Geneva Amadori. This year the tumbling was done by the "Blue Devils," no doubt local YMCA members and professionals.

Once again the flying act was the climax of the performance. This time there were 12 performers participating. The act included Clarence Croutcher, Irwin Croutcher, Walter Graybeal, Alma Fouin, Harry LaMar, Mickey Manhan, Charlie Fisher, Forrest Higgenbotham, Connie Fisher, Elmo Rankin and Edith Fisher. A photograph of all the aerialists from the show this year includes Eddie Ward Jr., Walter Graybeal, Irwin Croutcher, Frances Fisher, Maxine

Fisher, Edith Fisher, Evelyn Fleming, Gracie Genders, Connie Fisher, Antoinette Concello, LaVon Bornhauser, Marion Bordner, Harry LaMar, Warren Lynes, Wayne Larey and Francis Reiner.

## 1938

The YMCA Circus opened in 1938 on Monday the 21<sup>st</sup> at 8:15 P.M. and continued through Saturday, with a children's matinee on Saturday at 2:15 P.M. The show would include small dogs, monkeys and goats. The *Pantagraph* reported March 20 that the headliners of the show were to be the Upside-Down Millettes; the aerial act with Harry LaMar, Charles Fisher and Herb Fleming; the Blue Streak Tumblers; the Harold Voise stationary bar act; Ullaine Malloy; Marie's Marvel Dogs; and the Beagles Animals. Another new act would feature Lewis Probasco, Alma Foin, Bennett Halm, and Jess and Robert Parsons doing a human statuary act in gold paint. C. D. Curtis and B. B. Brooks were named as co-managers.

The program of the 1938 Y Circus presentation, as published in the *Pantagraph* March 20 ran as follows:

Specialty Number by the Adelaide Bach dance studio -  
A Bit of Tyrol

Aerial Bars - Harold Voise Troupe

Elephant Stunt - YMCA Boys

Little Aerial Number - Gracie Genders, Marian Bordner,  
Constance Fisher, Genevieve Ward and Vivian Nash

Animal Acts - Beagles

Iron Jaw Stunt - The Brooks Family

Tight Wire Act - Local amateurs

High Bar Act - Upside-Down Millettes

Dancing Puppets - Adelaide Bach dance students

High Wire Act - The Billettis

Gold Act - Living Statues

Dog Act - Marie's Marvel Dogs

Contortion Act - Ullaine Malloy

Tumbling - Blue Streak Tumblers: Bob Porter, William  
Krause, Jimmy Millette and Herbert Smith

Flying Act - Members of the Harry LaMar, Charles Fisher  
and Herbert Fleming troupes

Committee members were listed as follows:

Ushering and door keeping - Charles Butler, Roy





*Harold Helman's one-man band, 1937.*

Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections

Halloway, and members of the Young Men's Commercial Club.

Property men – Lloyd Eyer, Oscar Jordan, Joe Killian, Ulrich Burkhalter, Walter Werdebaugh, Tom Gaffney, Virgil Priller and Henry Robbins.

Publicity and advertising – Don Franks, John Cullinan, John S. Bowman, Kenneth McKay and Preston Ensign.

The Upside-Down Millettes were a father and son act. Young Eddie Millette performed a balancing act on single trapeze with his head balancing on a spinning ball on the trapeze as he juggled rings on his arms and legs. The Brooks family was from Indiana, near Peru. Among other tricks, father, C. W. Brooks, hung from a trapeze by his hocks holding a small bar on a swivel in an iron jaw clasp, from which his young daughter, Beverly June, revolved in a bird's nest position. Helen Billetti recalls Madame Marie, of the Beagle troupe, still performing in her 70s, running her animals through their paces in a long, beautiful, satin gown.

Hometown professionals included the Little Aerial

Number, with Gracie Genders, Marion Bordner, Constance Fisher, Genevieve Ward and Vivian Nash. Though the Billetti wire act was originally from Indiana, they had wintered in Bloomington so regularly that they could almost be called a hometown act. Ullaine Malloy was likewise a Bloomington native although originally from the west coast. The Blue Streak Tumblers were made up of Bob Porter, William Krause, Jimmy Millette and Herbert Smith. The Gold Act, as stated above: Alma Foin, Bennett Helm, Jess and Robert Parsons, and the originator of the act, Lewis Probasco. The flying act, also as mentioned above, was made up of only three men: Harry LaMar, Charles Fisher, and Herb Fleming.

The clown features were performed by Harold Genders, Tony Clendenin, Harold Ramage, and Harry Beagle. The music was performed by the community YMCA band.

Among the amateur acts presented was Adelaide Bach's dance act, called "A Bit of Tyrol," performed by the Adelaide Bach Dance Studio. The Elephant Stunt was performed by the YMCA boys.

## 1939

The popularity of the "Y" Circus in 1939 was as strong as ever it had been before. The *Pantagraph* predicted that the show would be attended by a combined audience of more than 5,000, with special groups coming from Chicago, Quincy, Decatur, Champaign, Streator and Peoria, Illinois. The "Y" Circus was presented Monday, March 27 through Saturday, April first. The advance *Pantagraph* articles of March 19 and 24 specifically mentioned that Ray Goodie, a wire walker with the Tom Mix Circus, would be a feature of the show.<sup>18</sup>

## The Program<sup>19</sup>

Producer - C. D. Curtis; associate producer, Bernard B. Smith

Concert by YMCA band, A. V. Manskey, director

Tournament – All performers, baton twirler, Esther Hileman

Opening Spectacle – Girls from the Adelaide Bach School of Dance doing a Mexican

Number

Triple Bars – The La Blonde Troupe





Wire walker, Ray Goodie, 1939.

Author's collection

Jockey Dance – Girls from the Adelaide Bach School of Dance

Perch – Jesse Parsons and Jimmy Thorson of I.S.N.U  
YMCA Boys Gym Exhibition

Rings and Trapeze – Constance Fisher, Doris Gertin,  
Lester Owens

Comedy Cannon – Andy Bakalar

Ray Goody – Slide for Life

Parallel Bars – Lewis Probasco, Jesse Parsons, Bennett  
Helm

Single Trapeze – Frank Shepherd, "World's premiere heel  
and toe aerial artist"

Adagio – Pontiac Circus

Whip Crackers – Boy Scouts: Rus Daugherty, Herb  
McGrath, George Gildner, Ed

McGrath; featuring Glenn Hilsabeck

Tight Wire – Ray Goodie

Five Sweethearts – Pontiac Circus

Ullaine Malloy – Blonde bombshell of the big top

Tumblers – Blue Streaks

Clowns – Harold Genders, Bob Porter, Tony Clenedenin,  
Vincent Wells, Dubois Rhodus, Glenn Hilsabeck, Willie  
Krause



A number of the people working behind the scenes were or would become professional aerialists. Carl Durbin was a catcher with Art Concello's flying acts. Oscar Jordan was an old school flyer. Joe Rimillette was one of Concello's flyers. Arthur Brown was a catcher and would soon travel to Australia with Wayne Larey's flying act, where they would be stranded with the outbreak of war. Brown then enlisted in the U. S. military in order to get out of Australia.

## 1940

The 1940 YMCA Circus opened on Monday, March 25<sup>th</sup> and ran through Saturday, the 30<sup>th</sup>. This year the "Y" Circus was being called "The Greatest Little Show on Earth," an advertisement that would likely have brought a court action from the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey show if it had been made published 20 years later. An advance article appeared in the *Pantagraph* March 16.<sup>20</sup>

### The Program<sup>21</sup>

Concert – the YMCA Community Band, Charles King, director

Tournament – All performers Esther Hileman, baton twirler

Opening Spectacle – "Way Out West," YWCA Dance Group (names illegible from the microfilm of the March 24 *Pantagraph*)

Dick Clemens and his jungle monarchs, Patsy and Tyrone, man eating lions, performing in their big steel arena

"Morning Exercises" – Willie Krause on the trampoline

#### Little Aerial Act

Boys in (?) – Symbolic Statuary Poses

Clown capers – "Toughie" Genders and his stooges

The La Blonde Troupe – Triple horizontal bars

More merry making – Men of Myrth

Gracie Genders in her daring cloud swing

The Five Sweethearts – Five young ladies from the Pontiac gym circus doing unbelievable back bends and contortions

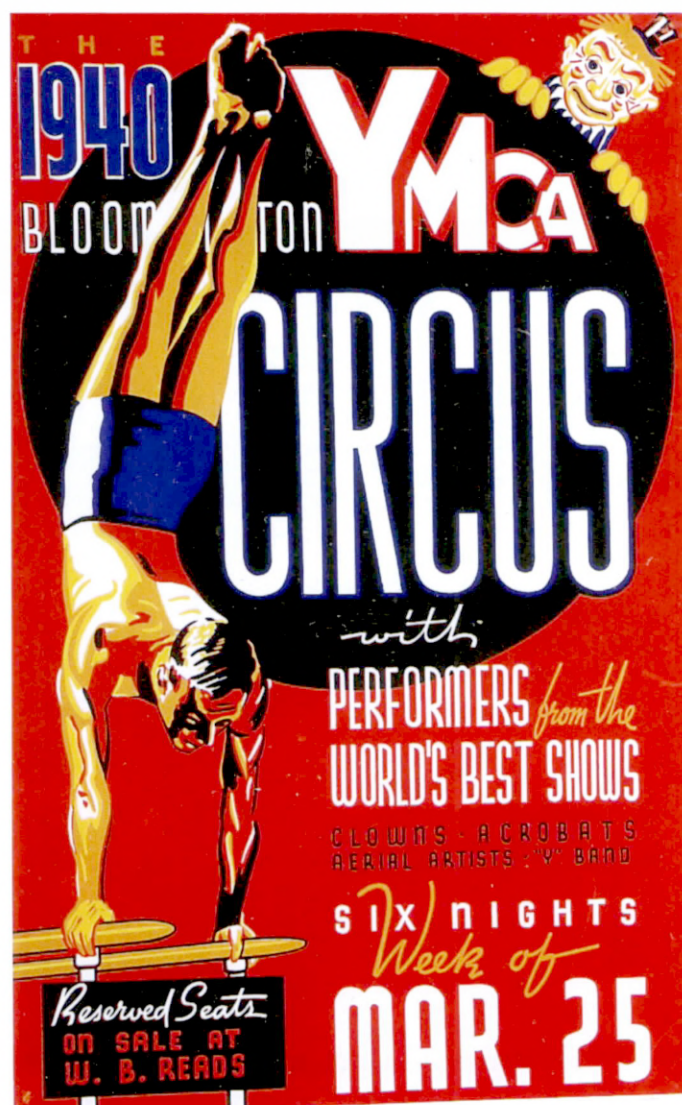
"Toughie and Tony in Trouble Again"

Ladder Pyramids – YMCA Young Men's Division

Solo Aerial Performance – Joan Spaulding

Adagio – Pontiac gym circus

Capt. John Snyder's performing bears on bicycles, stilts



YMCA Circus poster designed by Preston Ensign, 1940.

The McLean County Museum of History

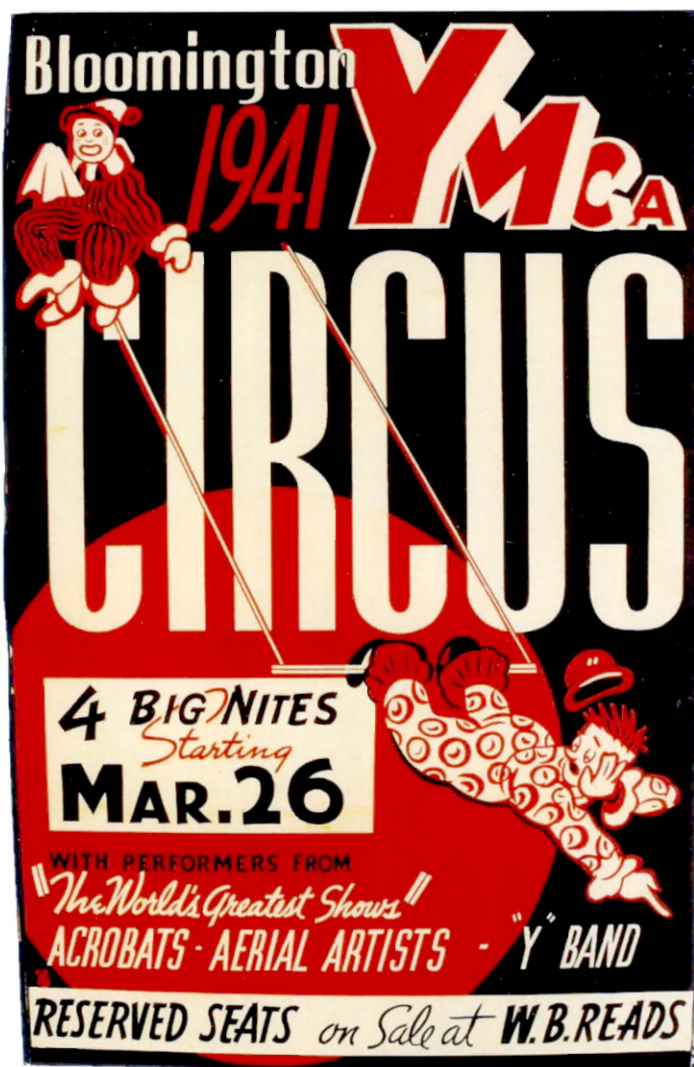
and roller skates

Tumbling – The Blue Streaks

Flying Return Act – Harry LaMar, Mary Stevens, Carl Durbin, Lewis Probasco, Warren Baker (?), Joe Killian, Bones Brown

The *Pantagraph* reported March 31 that the "Y" Circus had drawn over 5,000 people in its six day show. "It would have cost nearly \$5,000 to have staged this circus through regular booking channels," C. D. Curtis was quoted as saying. But, of course, everyone, including the visiting artists, was working gratis for the YMCA. "Special appreciation goes to Dick Clemens," the article concluded, "who broke his lions to work beautifully indoors on only one week's notice."<sup>22</sup>





YMCA Circus poster designed by Preston Ensign, 1941.

The McLean County Museum of History

## 1941

*Pantagraph* articles reported March 16<sup>23</sup> and 26<sup>24</sup> that advance ticket sales for the 1941 YMCA Circus were twice as high as in previous years. The run of the show was to begin the 26<sup>th</sup> at 8:15 P.M., continuing every night until Saturday the 29<sup>th</sup>, with a children's matinee on Saturday at 2:15 P.M. C. D. Curtis took a 90-day leave of absence in order to organize a new YMCA organization at Tullahoma, Tennessee in connection with the establishment of Fort Forrest there.

Little Y Circus reporting happened in the *Pantagraph* this year, but it was noted "Even the newest of the amateurs have prepared for months for their appearance at the Y," the *Pantagraph* reported. "The show, rated to be the finest of its kind in the world..." "A quick checkup Tuesday revealed

that more than 150 years of rehearsal have gone into the training of performers for this show. Some of the headliners have been appearing professionally for 25 years, and put in many months of training before that."<sup>25</sup>

It is very possible that the newspapers were so occupied with reporting the sensational news of the war raging in Europe that local happenings were simply overshadowed. No complete program for the YMCA show's 20 acts has been found, and only a few of the 20 acts were mentioned in *Pantagraph* articles in 1941, but some of the acts ran as follows, though not necessarily in this order:

Triple Stationary Bar Act – The LaBlonde Trio; three men, "Blondie," the father; two sons, 17 and 21; Bruce and Jim, of Pekin

"Play the American Way," 35 Bloomington boys – Merle Kellershals, George Gregg, John Hornbeck, Francis Stone, Jackie Brouger, Jack Smith, Bob Anderson, Harry Tapp, David Brady, Duane Vanderwater, Gerald Troxel, Harry Preston, Bob O'Connor, Robert Weakley, Merwyn Zarbuck, Harold Carney, Gerald Wylie, Clayton Poling, Ralph Mattingly, Ivan Houk, Denzal Cooper, Edgar Clemens, Durward Kleese, Jimmy Smith, Larry Meyer, Bobby Devary, Kemp Lynes, Kenneth Hill, Roy Benschneider, Arthur Stautz, Walter Hefler Jr., Lamar Rodman, Milton Olson and Denny Leicht

Clowns – led by Tony Clendenin

High Wire Act – The Billetti troupe

Solo Aerial – The Blonde Bomb Shell, Ullaine Malloy

Flying Trapeze – The LaMar Troupe

Tight Wire – Three youths trained by Eldred Sleeter

Adagio Act – Pontiac Circus students

Tap Dancing – young YWCA ladies trained by Ruth Farnham

Alkonion (?) the Great – fire and light bulb eater

## 1942

Note: It was announced in March of 1942 that regular Y Circus coach and tremendous coach of the Pontiac High School Circus, Glenn A. "Jack" Haskin, had taken a position as civilian instructor of physical education for the Army Air Corps in Tulsa, Oklahoma.<sup>26</sup> Pontiac students continued to present circus acts for a few years under the direction of Jack North, but the circus in Pontiac eventually died out. The *Pantagraph* reported February 14, 1944 that



Haskin was assistant director of physical training at Traux field, Madison, Wisconsin teaching the Wacs and soldiers tumbling, acrobatics and trapeze work. "Haskin will present an aerial circus in the field's new gymnasium between March 1 and 4." With that, a new phase of collegiate circus was begun in America. At the end of WWII Haskin accepted a position at Florida State University as athletic director, where he started the "Flying High Circus" in 1947.

February 6, 1942 the *Pantagraph* reported that the YMCA band had added seven new members, and hoped to get their enrollment up to 40 before the annual "Y" Circus.<sup>27</sup> This aspiration seems to have been premature, however. Though this author has heard rumors that there was an attempt to resurrect the "Y" circus after the war, there has been no indication that the YMCA presented a circus in 1942 or any time thereafter. C. D. Curtis had been the spearhead of the annual event for nearly 20 years, and his loss meant the demise of the circus as well. Furthermore, the country was still reeling from the devastating attack on Pearl Harbor four months earlier, and such a performance might have seemed inappropriate.

## Conclusion

In following years the YMCA would host an occasional circus event, but the annual circus was now a thing of the past. The legacy and profound influence of the Bloomington YMCA Circus on 20<sup>th</sup> century American popular culture is more important than is readily apparent, considering the subsequent events. In July of 1943 it was announced that Y product Art Concello had purchased the Russell Brothers Circus. Concello put the Russell show on rails and took it north through Canada, making it one of the most successful entertainment concerns in America. In spite of his stormy relationship with John Ringling North, he was again appointed manager of the Ringling Barnum show after two disastrous fires in the decade of the 1940s. Concello saw the *Greatest Show on Earth* through these

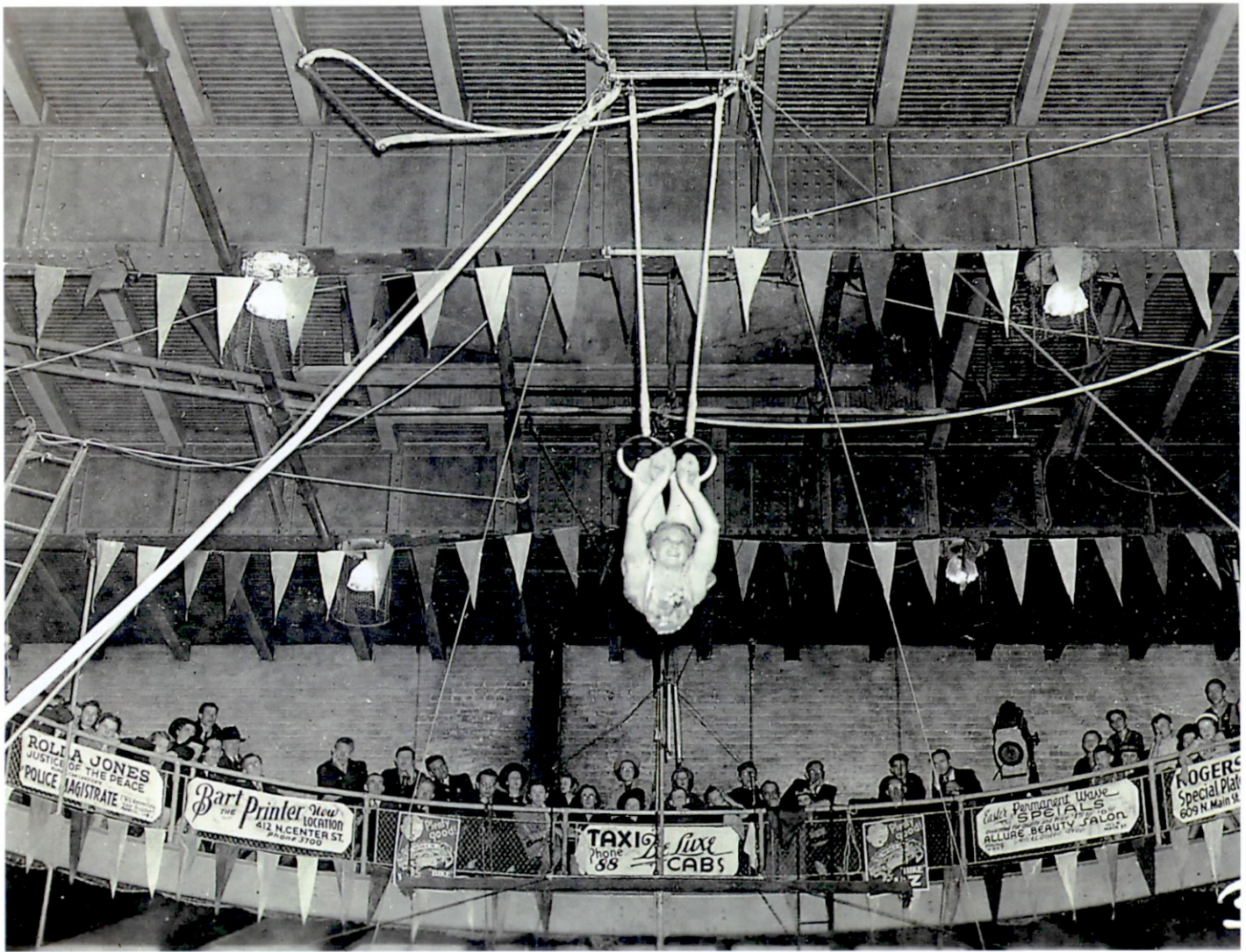


*Pontiac High School Circus acrobats, 1939.*

Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections

turbulent post-war times with shrewd insight and superior knowledge and judgement. But the influence of the YMCA Circus did not end in North America. Eldred Sleeter and Wayne Larey, both alums of the YMCA program in Bloomington, went into circus management in Australia after the war. What is more, dozens of YMCA Circus performers made lifetime careers in the circus profession, entertaining crowds throughout America and the world. These performers had a profound influence on the popular culture of America, and they were able to do it because Bloomington's YMCA allowed them to exploit their unique abilities and elevate their economic status. **BW**





*Ullaine Malloy at the YMCA Circus, c. 1936.*

Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections

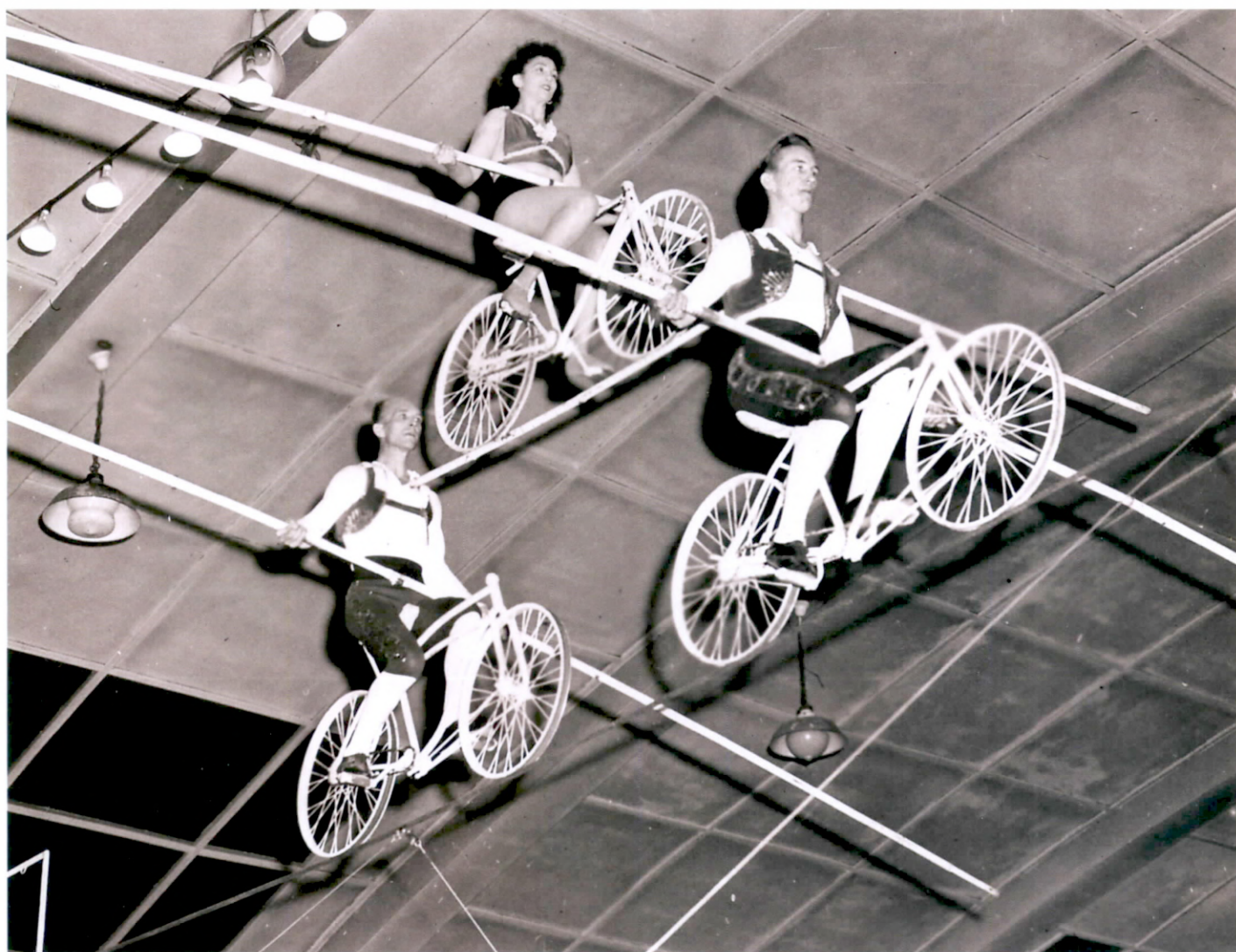
### Acknowledgements:

A special thanks (not necessarily in this order, and some of whom I never met personally) to: Harold Ramage, Arnold Riegger, Walt Graybeal, Lorraine Valentine, Mickey King, Jim Olsen, Howard Waters, Hellen Billetti Warburton, Chuck Imig, Lowell and Mary Sherer, Manuel Cordero, Cherie Valentine, Dennis Watson, the family of the Flying Wards, Craig Voise, Dee Volle, the YMCA of Bloomington, the staff of Milner Library Special Collections past and present, Maureen Brunsdale, Mark Schmitt, Teresa Thomason, Steve Meckstroth, Joan Winters, Arley Gillette, Jerry Polaeck, Al Light, Bill Jaeger, Russ Hany, Marcus Alouan, the Gamma Phi Circus organization, the Bloomington Public Library, the McLean County Historical Society, and the Circus Historical Society of America.

### Endnotes

1. *Pantagraph*, "Annual Y. M. Circus Opens," March 18, 1930, p. 3
2. *Pantagraph*, "YMCA Annual Circus Opens with True 'Big Top' Atmosphere," March 24, 1931, p. 3
3. *Pantagraph*, "Amateurs, Professionals to Join Tonight for Annual Y Circus," March 17, 1932, p. 3
4. *Pantagraph*, "Gamma Phi Circus Develops into Big Top Class at N.U.," March 11, 1939, p. 9
5. *Pantagraph*, "600 Attend Y.M. Circus," March 23, 1933, p. 8
6. *Pantagraph*, "180 to Enact Y. M. Circus," March 21, 1933, p. 3
7. *Pantagraph*, "Circus Performer to Hang by Heel on Swinging Bar," March 19, 1933, p. 5
8. *Pantagraph*, "600 Attend..."
9. *Pantagraph*, "Circus Signs Notable Acts," March 17, 1934, p. 3
10. *Pantagraph*, "Balloons Carrying Tickets to 'Y' Circus..." March 18, 1934, p. 20





*The Billetti wire act at the YMCA Circus, c. 1936.*

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11. *Pantagraph*, "'Y' Circus, With 136 Performers Will Open 4 Day Stand Tonight," March 21, 1934, p. 7
12. *Pantagraph*, "Y.M. Circus Thrills Many," March 22, 1934, p. 3
13. *Pantagraph*, "Circus Opens Stand Tonight," March 26, 1935, p. 14
14. Review of show which follows this comes from *Pantagraph*, "New Standard Set by Circus," March 27, 1935, p. 3
15. *Pantagraph*, "Circus Offers 15 Star Acts," March 22, 1936, p. 3
16. *Pantagraph*, "Circus Rises to New High," March 30, 1937, Except where noted, quotes come from this article
17. *Pantagraph*, "Scrapbook Settles Point: First 'Y' Circus Staged here in 1910," April 2, 1937, p. 5
18. *Pantagraph*, "'Y' Circus Will Open March 27" and "Slide for Life to be Part of 'Y' Circus," March 19 and 24, 1939 p. 5 and 13 respectively
19. *Pantagraph*, "19 Big Acts on Program of Circus," March 26, 1939, p. 12
20. *Pantagraph*, "Biggest Stars are to Appear in 'Y' Circus," March 16, 1940, p. 3
21. *Pantagraph*, "Animal Acts Added to 'Y' Aerial Circus," March 24, 1940, p.9
22. *Pantagraph*, "5000 See 'Y' Circus," March 31, 1940, p. 7
23. *Pantagraph*, "YMCA Circus to be Staged March 26-29," March 16, 1941, p. 3
24. *Pantagraph*, "Crowds to see Circus at 'Y,'" March 26, 1941, p. 5
25. *Pantagraph*, "Crowd Cheers 'Y' Circus Acts," March 27, 1941, p. 8
26. *Pantagraph*, "Haskin of Circus Fame to Make Flyers Fit," March 22, 1942, p. 4
27. *Pantagraph*, "YMCA Band Gets 7 New Members," February 6, 1942, p. 16



# *Circus Historical Society 2016 Convention*

*by Frederick Dahlinger, Jr.*

In the midst of the worst year for the American circus since 1938, the annual gathering of the Circus Historical Society shone like a beacon for those wanting to immerse themselves in the enduring show heritage of Sarasota, Florida. Since Ringling-Barnum arrived at the end of the 1927 season, the city and its environs has been a circus colony of unequalled importance. Sarasota and circus became synonymous over the next four decades. The city hosted the last presentation by a railroad tent circus on November 21, 1956, but nearby Venice, to the south, and Ellenton to the north have served as the home base for the only two troupes making annual campaigns by rail. In the nine decades unto today, much circus history has been created in the balmy Gulf Coast city and surrounding area.

Reflecting the local heritage, the convention agenda spanned from the past and present into the future. In addition to an

abundance of fellowship between members and veterans of the show world, scholarly papers, personal testimonies, site visitations, film screenings and live shows populated a full three day schedule.



*CHS President Don Covington presents William "Buckles" and Barbara Woodcock with a plaque recognizing their contributions to the circus arts and its history.*

*photo by Jennifer Lemmer Posey*





*Retired performers Mary Jane Miller and Jackie LeClaire share their memories of the Ringling show and Sarasota Winter Quarters.* photo by Deborah W. Walk

Festivities started with a Wednesday, October 12, evening kick-off gathering at the well-known Showfolks of Sarasota clubhouse. In addition to opportunities for mixing with show veterans, there was a special recognition made of a legendary couple, Buckles and Barbara Woodcock. The night's wrap-up was a lively auction that benefitted both Showfolks and CHS, whereby numerous bargains were obtained by enthusiastic bidders.

CHS President Don Covington and Ringling Museum Director Steven High formally opened the event schedule on Thursday morning with their gracious remarks that enthused attendees to take full advantage of what was available locally, including admittance to Ringling Museum grounds and galleries.

Two delightful Ringling-Barnum vets from the tent show days, Mary Jane Miller and Jackie LeClaire, engaged a spellbound audience with remembrances of their touring days, and the deep affection that has grown between them over decades.

Three well-known Feld Entertainment employees, Janice Aria (Director,



*Karen Bell and Robin Eurich from the Circus Arts Conservatory present a portion of the Circus Science Machine.*

photo by Deborah W. Walk



Animal Stewardship), Ruthie Chaddock (Special Events Manager) and Peggy Williams (Education Outreach Manager), staged a first time ever panel discussion wherein they educated the audience about their roles with the entertainment behemoth. They gave insights on their initial joining, achievements and ongoing duties that amazed listeners.

In the afternoon Karen Bell and Robin Eurich, with the Circus Arts Conservatory, enlightened the attendees about the Circus Science Machine, an outreach program that coordinates elementary curriculum with circus arts to illustrate basic physics con-



*Peggy Williams and convention organizer Pete Adams share a laugh during the tour of Feld Entertainment Studios.*  
photo by Richard Czina



*Brian Liddicoat in front of the Bell Wagon at Feld Entertainment Studios*

photo by Richard Czina





(L-R) Janet Davis and Maureen Brunsdale

photos by Richard Czina

cepts to area fifth graders. The group then toured the expansive, state of the art Ringling Archives and Circus Museum, including the collections housed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of the Tibbals Learning Center. In the evening retired boss clown and film historian Kenny Dodd kept an audience on the edges of their seats with a presentation of unbelievable vintage circus films, many of which had never been screened before an audience. The circus days of old were brought to life in color and with commentary.

Friday commenced with a bus ride to Ellenton, where Feld Entertainment occupies Florida's second largest building, which serves as their headquarters and creative production facility. The tour of the combined operations center was hard to grasp, in part because only about half of the giant-sized facility was included on the tour. Not seen was another area, equal in square footage to the toured portion, which is devoted to rail car recycling and other activities. Feld staffers were expansive in their remarks about organizational activities, which span all continents except for Antarctica and now entertain the citizens of many nations. Given the firm's exposure, a number of remarks addressed risk assessment, insurance and other aspects of staging entertainment in areas of the world that are much less secure than the USA.

Frequent CHS presenter Janet Davis initiated the Friday afternoon agenda with a lecture about her newest target topic, "Performing Sharks." The lead-up to "Jaws-Mania" was followed by the Harvard Theatre Collection's new manager, Matthew Wittman, educating attendees about that storied collection that contains millions of items and

how to navigate it. The local Sarasota efforts to provide support for retired showfolks was the focus of Dorita Estes paper about CATS, a retirement facility.

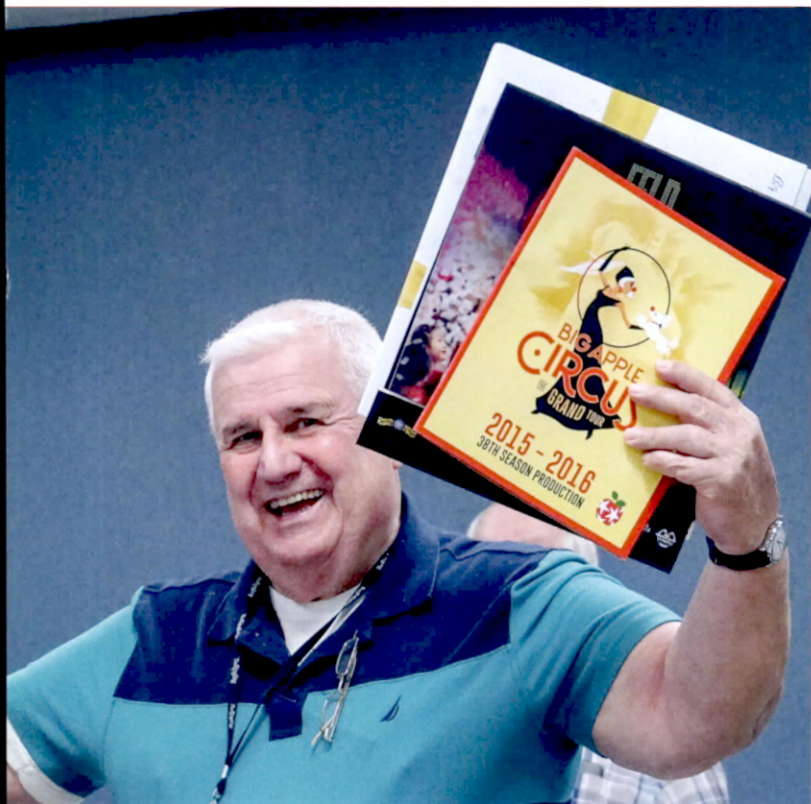
The legendary Arthur M. Concello, the "Little Caesar" of the circus, was exposed as never before in an erudite and insightful way by the tag team of Maureen Brunsdale and Mort Gamble, which will form the basis of a biography of the intriguing man. Al Slaggert, a first time presenter, enlightened veteran historians with a compelling argument that indicated it wasn't Emmett Kelly, but trapeze clown



Mort Gamble

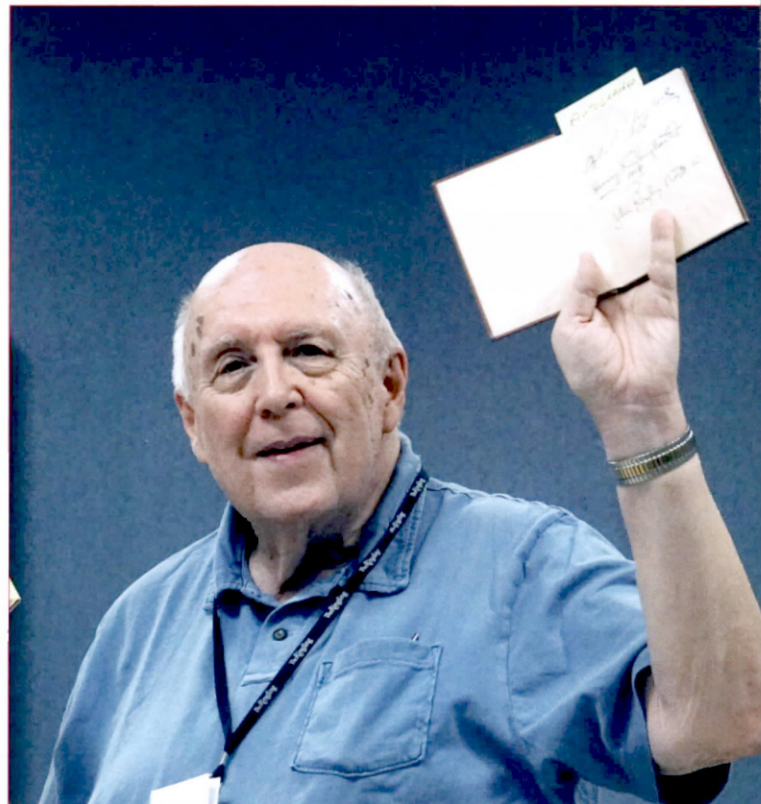
photo by Richard Czina





*Below, Ed Todd helps with the CHS auction.*

photo by Richard Czina



*Clark Beurlen holds up treasures during the auction.*

photo by Richard Czina



*Al Slaggert presents his history of Ray Thomas.*

photo by Deborah W. Walk





*Sailor Circus performers presented during the group's visit to the Circus Arts Conservatory.*

photo by Deborah W. Walk



*The final evening of the convention was hosted at the Rosaire family's Big Cat Habitat.*

photo by Deborah W. Walk





*Pam Zoppe performs with her chimpanzee, Chance.*

photo by Deborah W. Walk



*Clayton Rosaire presents a portion of his act which includes information to better inform the audience about his family's work with the big cats.*

photo by Deborah W. Walk





David Carlyon accepts the 2016 Stuart Thayer Prize.

photo by Deborah W. Walk

Ray Thomas, his friend, who was photographed carrying a water bucket in the midst of the 1944 Hartford fire tragedy. The day's papers ended with Fred Dahlinger presenting evidence in favor of Spencer Q. Stokes being given credit for implementing the riding mechanic in the early 1870s. The evening was filled with the annual auction, which again made a substantial contribution to the group's treasury.

Janet Davis led off the Saturday agenda with a lecture taken from her new book, *American Animal Welfare: A Historical Perspective*, and signed copies for motivated buyers. The afternoon was highlighted by a visit and tour of the Circus Arts Conservatory. Pedro Reis and Dolly Jacobs both articulated their vision for the future, an ambitious plan that will ensure a spotlight always shines on circus talent in Sarasota. A number of students currently enrolled in their programming then presented their acts before an admiring audience.

A glimpse into part of the 2017 CHS meeting agenda was provided by Preston Scott, Curator of the Circus Arts Program that will be the subject of the Smithsonian Institution's 2017 Folklife Festival. A lively discussion ensued concerning the content of the event that will be held in July.

Twilight marked the start of the evening at the Rosaire animal compound. An eye-filling and stomach-satisfying first rate barbecue provided by staff members received rave reviews that were not dampened by a heavy rainfall. The first occupant of the Rosaire steel arena was David Carlyon, whose recent autobiographical volume, *The Education of a Clown*, earned him the 2016 Stuart Thayer Prize. In his remarks, Carlyon recognized the personal friendship and influence that he received from the award's namesake. The Rosaire proceeded to stage an enjoyable show that highlighted the unique relationship between humans and animals, an engagement that has made the circus a unique institution and art form.

Beyond the fellowship, education and enjoyable activity, it is important to note that the convention was a financial success, too. A total of 109 registrants from 17 states and two Canadian provinces attended. The convention proceeds netted nearly two thousand dollars for the treasury, which was augmented with nearly five thousand dollars more from the benefit auction. This is a substantial amount that facilitates partial fulfillment of the CHS's educational mission.

Considerable credit and liberal thanks are due to many individuals for their part in making our convention such a success. A special thanks goes to Pete Adams for organizing the logistics and to Deborah Walk for coordinating the speakers. CHS is grateful to The Showfolks of Sarasota, the Circus Arts Conservatory, Feld Entertainment, Inc., The Ringling Museum, and the Big Cat Habitat and Gulf Coast Sanctuary for hosting our group.

## 2017 CHS Convention

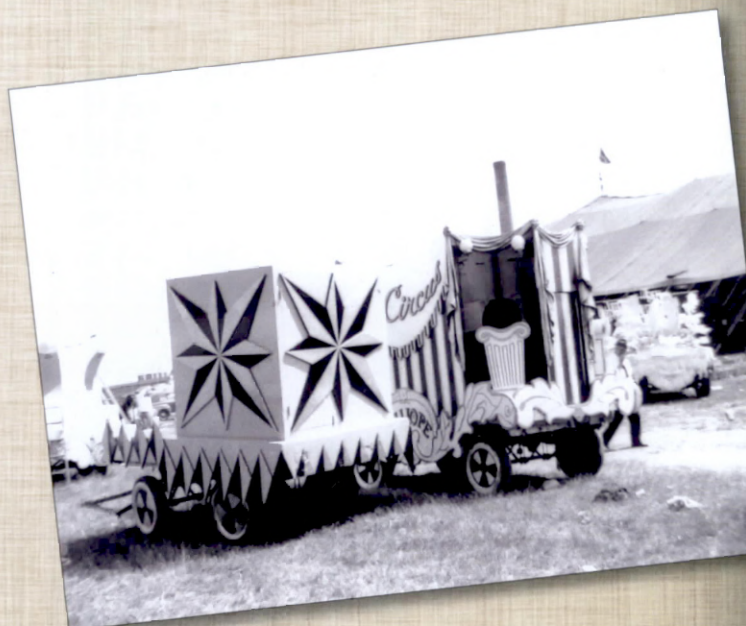
The 2017 CHS convention will be in Washington DC, in conjunction with the Smithsonian Institution's Folklife Festival on the Mall, June 29-July 4 and 5-9. The theme will be "Circus Arts." General information is available at: <http://www.festival.si.edu/2017/circus-arts/smithsonian> The CHS event falls within the category of "legacy." Richard W. Flint has been appointed the convention chair. Reasonable hotel rates are being negotiated in the vicinity of the Rosslyn Metro station, which will facilitate easy access to the Mall area. Monitor the CHS website for further information as the plan is developed and made available. **BW**



# The Circus Historical Society proudly presents the Richard and Albert Conover Photographic Collection

*Sets offered in previous issues of  
Bandwagon are still available.*

- Set # 104 - James M. Cole - 1923-1933 - Rolling Stock  
25 photos by Wm. Koford - \$13.00
- Set # 137 - Russell Bros. Circus - 1936 - Rolling Stock  
11 photos by Wm. Koford - \$6.00
- Set # 142 - Wallace Bros. Circus - 1939 - a lot of winter  
quarters - 16 photos by Wm. Koford - \$ 8.00
- Set # 441 - RB&BB - 1948 - mostly floats  
19 photos - \$10.00
- Set # 461 - Tim McCoy Wild West - 1938 - train and  
wagons - 10 photos - \$5.00
- Set # 508 - Cole Bros. Circus - 1947 mostly the train  
20 photos by George Hubler - \$10.00
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- 24 photos by Ralph Miller - \$12.00
- Set # 899 - Robbins and Cole wagons at Bradley farm -  
1946 - 18 photos - \$9.00



The CHS receives half the income after expenses on all sets sold. Please add \$4.00 shipping for one set or \$7.00 for two or more sets. Make checks payable to The Circus World LLC and mail to 2707 Zoar Road, Cheraw SC 29520-4133. You can also order on our website at [www.thecircusworld.com](http://www.thecircusworld.com) or email [tigeract@thecircusworld.com](mailto:tigeract@thecircusworld.com).



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Sarasota FL 34243-2161

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## President's Update

Hello Everyone,

Recent events in the circus business continue to make national headlines. Future historians will surely mark this time as a milestone in the evolution of American circus. I appreciate all of the CHS members who responded to requests for interviews from the press. Your balanced perspective helped educate the public on the tradition and resiliency of an art form that we know will continue to be an important part of our national cultural heritage.

We all owe a debt of gratitude to Judy Griffin, who has served as CHS Webmaster for the past 14 years. Her dedication to the site allowed us to reach a broad audience of researchers, historians and fans that might not otherwise have been aware of our organization. Judy stepped down from the post in December and at that time the Board of Trustees elected to begin a major upgrade of the site including improvements to allow us to serve an even greater number of users, provide state of the art options and to prepare for additional changes in the future. Keep an eye on the CHS website for exciting new developments.

You'll notice a change to your dues schedule this year. CHS is transitioning to a program that ties your annual dues to the organization's fiscal year. All members who were current as of the end of 2016 will receive their next dues notice in the autumn of 2017. From that point onward, your annual dues will be tied to the calendar year and you can expect to receive a dues reminder each fall. If you have any questions concerning your dues, contact CHS Treasurer Les Smout.

The Circus Historical Society's 2017 convention will be in Washington DC in conjunction with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Convention chair Dick Flint promises that your time in the nation's capitol will be filled with unique opportunities to explore circus history. You don't want to miss this one. It will be an ideal time for us to reflect on our role in defining the fascinating era in which we find ourselves today.

I look forward to seeing you in Washington in July.

*Don Covington*



# Circus Historical Society 2017 Annual Convention

July 2-July 5, Washington DC

The 2017 annual convention of the Circus Historical Society will be held in Washington DC and coincide with the 50<sup>th</sup> year of the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival, annually held on the National Mall and this year celebrating the Circus Arts. Our convention will include this country's Fourth of July birthday as well as those of both James A. Bailey (born July 4, 1847) and P.T. Barnum (born July 5, 1810)! We promise you our *Greatest Convention on Earth* for 2017!

## Tentative Schedule

If you contemplate arriving in advance of the convention, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival first opens on Thursday, June 29, and continues daily, 11:00 A.M.-5:30 P.M. through the start of our convention and after.

**Sunday July 2** – Early arrivals can visit the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, open 11:00 A.M.-5:30 P.M.

- Late afternoon: registration begins at the Key Bridge Marriott
- Evening: opening session and orientation to events and locations

**Monday July 3** – Smithsonian Folklife Festival open 11:00 A.M.-5:30 P.M.

- Morning: Library of Congress circus poster and related collections
- Afternoon: open time to visit festival
- Evening: Circus Sarasota performance

**Tuesday July 4** – Smithsonian Folklife Festival open 11:00 A.M.-5:30 P.M.

- Morning: seminar presentations
- Afternoon: open time to visit festival
- Evening: CHS Banquet and guest speaker, special access viewing of the National Capital Fourth of July fireworks

**Wednesday July 5** – Festival is closed all day

- Morning: seminar presentations
- Afternoon: annual benefit auction of circusiana
- Evening: bus trip to special reception and performance of UniverSoul Circus

**Thursday July 6** – Optional day, Smithsonian Folklife Festival open 11:00 A.M.-5:30 P.M. and continues through July 9

- Evening: U.S. Marine band concert of patriotic and, likely, circus music, U.S. Capital grounds

Throughout the course of the convention, special never-before-seen historical films and rarely viewed circus documentaries will be shown at the hotel.

## Hotel and Transportation

Our 2017 convention hotel is the Key Bridge Marriott, located directly off Interstate-66 and the George Washington Memorial Parkway in Arlington, Virginia. The hotel sits on the edge of the Potomac River and overlooks the wooded and attractive Parkway lands. The Washington Monument, site of the Fourth of July Capital fireworks display, is within easy view and offers us a very special and spectacular convention event viewable from the top floor of the hotel following our banquet.

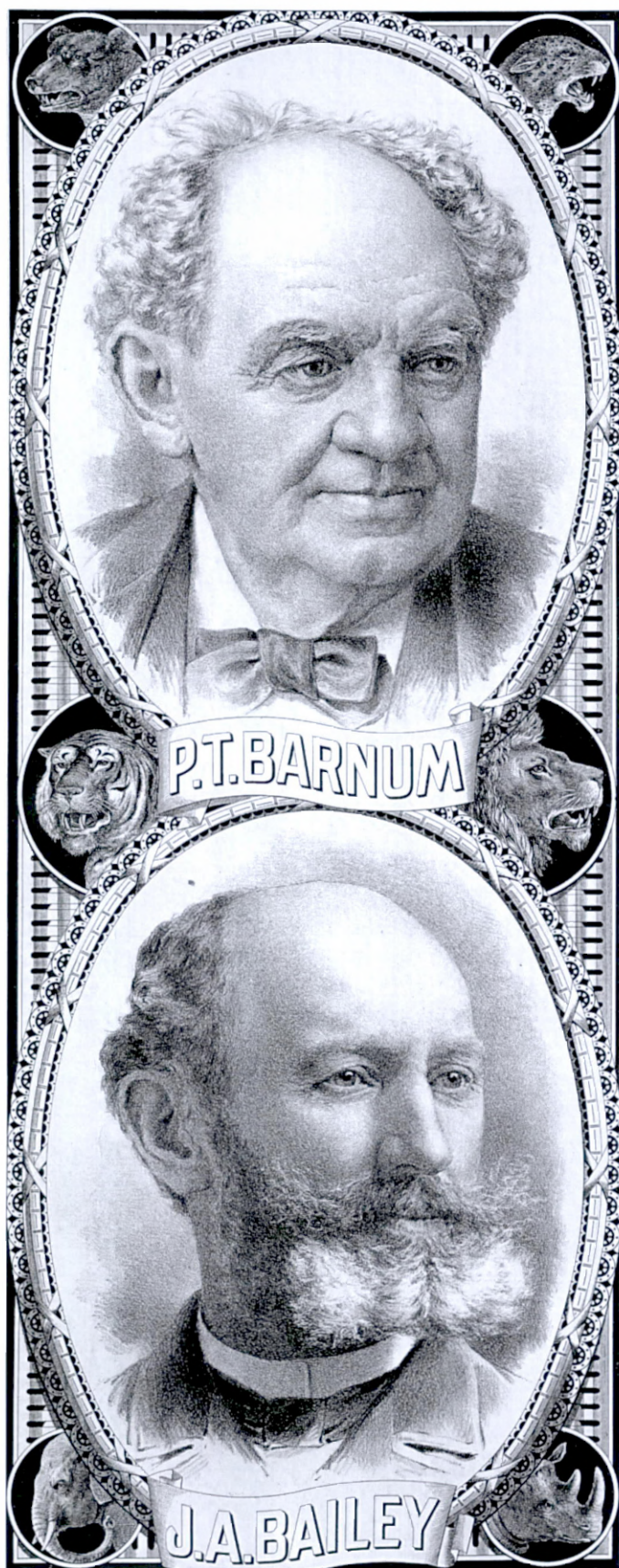
For those who will fly to Washington, Reagan Airport is nearby with quick, easy, and direct (no train changes) subway connections to the Rosslyn station, three blocks from the hotel. Free hotel parking is offered to those who are driving.

This year's convention hotel – also site of the 1982 CHS Washington convention – was selected because it is also the hotel for the several hundred participants in the 2017 Folklife Festival. Nearly every hotel guest will be associated in some way with the circus! However, rooms set aside for our use are very limited and members contemplating going to Washington are strongly urged to make reservations promptly. If you are slow to act, you will find Washington rates much more expensive than the extraordinary discount CHS members are offered by the Marriott. Book now and the money you save can go towards that rare collectible in our always popular auction of circusiana!

In addition to the hotel restaurants, numerous eateries of varying price ranges can be found within a short walking distance. Printed directions to their locations will be provided to CHS members.

The hotel, as noted, is only three blocks from the Rosslyn station of Metro, Washington's subway system. Metro provides quick and direct travel (no change of trains) to the National Mall, site of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, and continues on to the Library of Congress that we will visit to see rare posters and other circus source material.





*Detail from an 1889 Barnum & Bailey poster.*

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

## The Smithsonian Folklife Festival

Marking its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2017, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival will feature today's rich diversity of circus arts in the United States on the National Mall in Washington DC. Drawing from generations of circus families and new forms of expression, the program will highlight the life and work of circus artists from throughout the country.

The program will highlight families for whom circus arts have been a way of life for generations, and artists who immigrated to the United States bringing their traditions. The rapid emergence of youth circuses and circus-related schools – many started by veteran artists – is creating grassroots opportunities for new artistic expressions that also will be explored and shared with the public at the 2017 festival event.

The program will allow visitors to explore circus life through behind-the-scenes encounters. Narrative stages will facilitate ongoing intimate conversations about contemporary topics, providing further opportunities for the public to meet with and learn from active and retired artists alike.

### Circus Performances

The Folklife Festival site on the mall is where we will see a special evening performance under Circus Sarasota's big top on Monday night. Late Wednesday afternoon, we will board a bus at the hotel to take us to the new National Harbor just outside of DC and the big top of UniverSoul Circus. Staff and performers will participate in an hour-long special event for us prior to doors. UniverSoul offers elephants and other performing animals for our entertainment in a traditional one-ring format under the big top.

### Seminars and Library of Congress Visit

A three-ring offering of historical presentations typifies all CHS conventions but Washington DC, with its large and rich library and museum collections, gives us a special opportunity to see and discover an abundance of diverse historical sources. Staff members from several divisions within the Library of Congress will share their professional knowledge to help us hone our skills in discovering the vast array of materials now accessible through online collection catalogs and digitization. Presentations and special displays will be made by experts in the fields of posters, newspapers, moving images (film), and other special collections including rare sideshow material collected by magician Harry Houdini who maintained a life-long interest in such arcane performers.

Members who are interested in making seminar presentations should contact Convention Chairman Richard Flint at [rwflint@gmail.com](mailto:rwflint@gmail.com) with a 1-3 paragraph proposal.



# ***Circus Historical Society***

## **Washington DC Annual Convention**

### **July 2-5, 2017**

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Guest(s) \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_  
Cell phone \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_ @ \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have special dietary needs? ☐ No ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Gluten Free

Registration fee(s) (member or guest)	\$160.00	# _____	\$ _____
Registration fee(s) (non-member)	\$220.00	# _____	\$ _____
Additional UniverSoul tickets	\$45.00	# _____	\$ _____
Additional banquet tickets	\$65.00	# _____	\$ _____
Late fee (between June 1 <sup>st</sup> & June 24 <sup>th</sup> )		\$50.00	\$ _____
Late fee (after June 25 <sup>th</sup> )		\$75.00	\$ _____
	<b>Total</b>		\$ _____

Convention will be held at the **Key Bridge Marriott**  
1401 Lee Hwy, Arlington VA 22209 Phone: 703-524-6400

**Reservation: 800-228-9290 or 703-413-5500**

**Group Name "Circus Historical Society July 2017"**

Singles or doubles are \$129/night plus tax. Free overnight parking.  
Special rate available only until June 4, 2017. Rooms are limited.

**Check-in will begin at 3:00 P.M. Sunday July 2<sup>nd</sup> at the Marriott.**

#### **CANCELLATION POLICY**

Before June 1<sup>st</sup> – full refund

On or after June 1<sup>st</sup> – full refund less \$25.00 processing fee

After June 25<sup>th</sup> or no show – **NO REFUND**

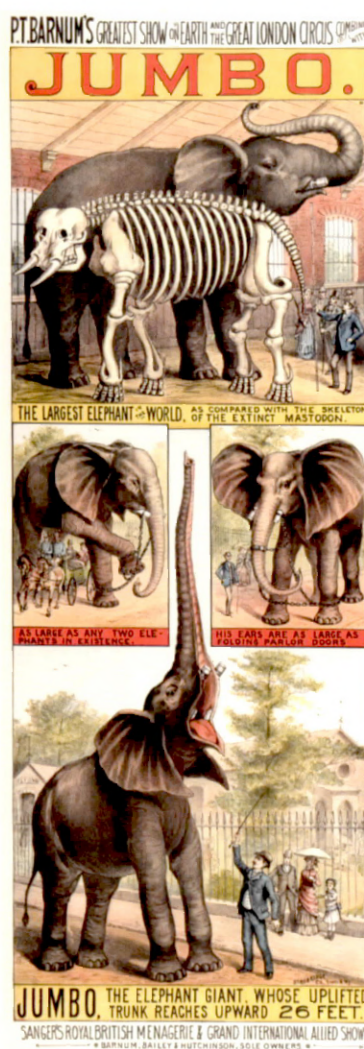
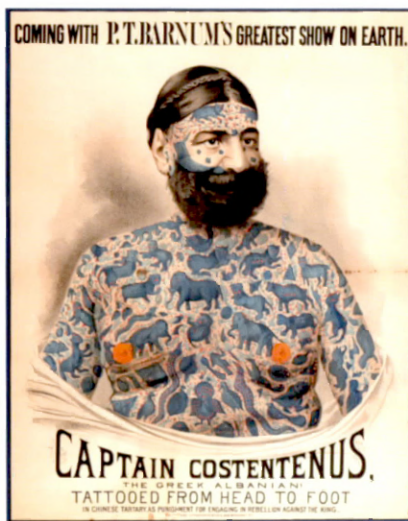
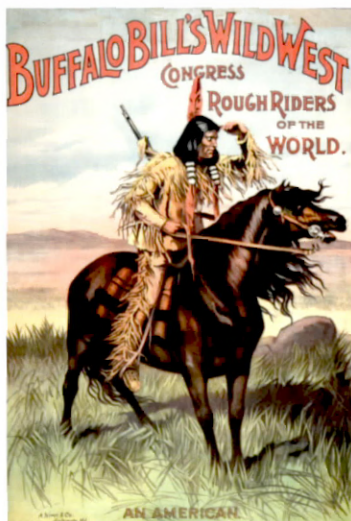
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